

STARVATION RIDGE



With Illustrations by Katrin Orav

Stony Run Press

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Dedicated to The Cowboy.

By the same author:

100 poems

collected poems

homecomings

iron buddhas

Viewing Jasper Mountain

SHE CAME to the river after sunset.

Much of the water was foaming white here, where she'd come down from the woods, but she could see that the pool upstream, just above where the riffles began, was shallow enough to cross. Gripping her staff, a straight, polished length of young willow, she turned upstream, placing her feet carefully, carefully as ever. She had never met a doctor or seen a working hospital. Everything always depended on knowing where your feet were.

As she came to the still water, she looked long upstream and down, and surveyed the opposite, boulder-strewn bank meticulously. Not that one could tell much among so many rocks, the racket of the little rapids, and the gathering darkness, but any movement, any sound, any appearance of disturbed soil might be a matter for investigation – or flight.

She sat down to unlace her boots. She had made them herself, rubber-tire soles, leather uppers, and knew, from the many hours she had put into them, their value.

Briefly she looked down into the water. A stern, narrow face, past childhood, framed in a coarse halo of brown, almost black hair, stared back at her. Wide mouth, brown eyes, light caramel skin. If there were more light, one might discover freckles round her nose.

Tall, she was, though she could not know this by comparison. She'd met fewer than fifty people in her lifetime, almost all in the last two years.

Caddis larvae among the round rocks: clean stream. A good sign.

Pulling off the boots and a pair of socks which had been made from the sleeves of a sweatshirt, she rolled up her trouser legs, stuffed the socks into her boots and hung the pair round her neck.

Can't travel in wet shoes, her father had said. Cross wet, dry off, travel dry. Wet feet blister. Wet shoes lose their shape. Too much can go wrong, then. Wet shoes will squeak, too. You need everything on your side, sight, sound, smell, touch, and time. Everything.

In forty mindful steps, using her staff to hold against the iced, insistent current that sought to undermine her numbing soles, she was across.

Watching the riverbank she'd just come from, she dried her feet with her bandanna (cut from the same sweatshirt), got into her socks and boots. *Tie your laces like this, he'd said. Over once and then over a second time, then pull. Twice holds better than once and that can matter when you have to run.*

She took inventory without thought, touching her staff, her right front pocket (twice), belt, belt cup, sheath knife, backpack, bedroll, bow, and her four precious arrows, three broadheads and a blunt,

which were clipped to the right side of her pack, fletches down. The lids were tight on her water bottles in their pockets low on the pack. The bow, a short non-recurved child's fiberglass model from the days before compound bows, was clipped to the left side. Her father had designed the clips, spring-loaded. He'd had a lot of tools and stuff in his little underground shop. She patted her breast pockets. Bowstring, right. Spare bowstring, left. All go.

Old-fashioned gear, he'd said. Can't go to the store anymore anyhow, so it doesn't matter. But I used that pack for thirty-five years, so you know it has some staying power. And it's not camo, but it's all a good green, nothing shiny. Shiny is not good. Here, let's break up its outline a bit with this old shoe polish.

Keeping everything close, she eased down to the water as night raised a mist on the pool. Looking left and right once more, she dipped her cup between two stones. She drank, looked round once more, and retreated into shadow.

She'd need to go about two hundred feet from the bank, she thought. Large animals like to work along streams, or along slopes, halfway up to the ridge tops. Right in between, she could bed down, perhaps beneath the long green hands of a cedar. They kept a body dry. With enough care, and enough cedars, she wouldn't need a fire until fall. It meant eating a lot of things raw, but that, she was used to by now.

Good night, Karen, he had said. I'll see you in the morning.
Those had been his last words to her.

Book I

These Will I Bring

These will I bring *to my holy mountain... Is. 56:7*

A QUIET, tall, stooped, gray, unsmiling and yet not unkindly man, Father had shared all his thoughts but kept his feelings packed away where his face could not find them. He'd had a harried former life, but his schedule was his own now. He'd had time to organize his plans and act on them.

With education, he might have been an architect; certainly a master builder. He had put a lot of thought into the design of their basement fortress. The entrance was covered by a sheet of steel that could be (and generally was) chained down from inside, by means of a through-bolt in the hinged door and another, with a turnbuckle to take up slack, in the floor beneath. The outside of the door was covered with brush that was pinned and glued together to stay in place as the door was lifted or dropped, and even when it was open it could not be seen by anyone who had not penetrated the overgrown shrubbery along the foundations of the ruined house.

Three of the exterior walls of the former bungalow – it had been a very large house, one that Father could never have "owned" in that other life – had long ago burned through and collapsed, and the back wall supported a bit of roof and a wide soffit, so that the rain, even when it began to spill over the edge of the rusting gutters, could not scatter the brush on their trapdoor, nor seep into the entryway.

Below, there were four rooms arranged in a spiral, with heavy doors to pass through from one to the next. The interior walls were double thicknesses of cinder block. The first room was living room, kitchen, dining, bath, laundry, and pantry all in one – like a twentieth century bomb shelter, which perhaps it had once been.

A very large pit toilet, lined with brick, had been dug, which had never needed emptying, and which was vented between the studs of the one house wall, above.

Water poured, clean and sweet, from a hand pump over the sink, piped from a well hidden in the basement of an empty, burned out house up the weed-choked street. Five-gallon plastic buckets caught sink water and bath water, and were emptied into a laundry tub in the corner by the pit toilet, next to a bucket of lime with a trowel in it. The water drained into perforated pipe buried in what had been a lawn, two "lots" away. There had been just enough slope to make it work.

Food came mostly from cans. In her childhood Karen remembered something called MREs or meals-ready-to-eat, but they were a distant memory. Father had explained that a surprising sequence of events had made it possible for them to have a steady supply of canned food over the years.

First, there had been several bumps in the supply of fuel – oil (Karen had seen a sample) was the form of fuel that had caused most

of the difficulty. This led to a series of "economic depressions" – people had lost their jobs and had walked away from their mortgages. At the same time there had been, everywhere, three or four very widespread diseases, fatal to some and debilitating to others.

Next, there had been a war. Complex, long, and grievous, it had involved the peoples of many lands and, because nuclear power plants and their spent fuel pools had been popular targets, the world as he had known it had poisoned itself fatally.

Then had come, locally, an earthquake, which had shattered the electrical, water and sewer systems and caused fires which had not been put out. Hungry and sickly people had gone away by the thousands, mostly northward.

"Early on, I decided, as I was unemployed anyway, to stay put and raise my family on what could be gathered. Before everyone else had quite gotten away, before, ahh, the appearance of organized gangs – those stripped everything, then left – I made sure to be the first to pick through the food warehouses – the grocery stores were already empty. And I worked the hardware and clothing stores. It was slow, because I didn't want to meet anyone."

He would have smiled at this point in his story, if it had been his nature. There was a hint of one in his eyes, but it faded away quickly. The man lived under a shadow.

Father pushed his glasses up his nose and rubbed the balding spot on the back of his head.

"If I had had time to get to the pharmacies and sporting goods stores before they were emptied, we might have been pretty well set. As it is, we did all right. I mean, in the sense that, ahh, we ... well, we two at least ... are still here. It's amazing but there it is. I mean ... if the earthquakes had not happened when they did, I think, the canned goods might have been gone before I could get to them. And there would have been nothing left to do but run, with everyone else. With, ahh, really, nowhere to go."

Again, no mention of Mother. Karen knew, by now, that it would be useless to ask. Something, longer ago than she could remember, had happened to leave this man with one other human being to talk to than herself.

There could be no question of fire. Their warmth came from the insulating he had done, over time, with found materials, and from sweaters and knit wool hats – sometimes gloves and lap blankets as well. Not often, though. Their world was, on the whole, more hot than cold now. The basement was a help in summer, when so many things were scorching in the harsh world above.

The second room, even larger, was a workshop. Father and Karen kept regular hours there. She became familiar with tools, metalwork, carpentry, rudimentary sewing, plumbing, and leatherwork. The door

from there to the living room was the heaviest, flanked by a closet of the second room from which a disguised gun slit covered the outside of the door.

This room doubled as the schoolroom and gymnasium. It was here that teaching and training occupied most of their days.

The third room was Father's and was little more than a walk-through closet with a bed.

The fourth was Karen's and it was the only home she'd ever known. A futon, a dresser with a cracked mirror, a few plush toys, including Doll, her one-eared pink rabbit – not much else. Makeup and jewelry were unknown to her, except in theory. Feminine hygiene was an issue that had come early; she had been left to work it out on her own.

Father could be counted on to provide for *almost* all contingencies, but there were, apparently, lines he could not cross in his mind. Gaps had appeared in his "shopping" accordingly.

The dresser and a closet held clothes, yes, but a lot of these were mostly jeans and microfiber hoodies, all the same style and either green or desert camo. Where they'd come from she had no idea; every couple of years Father would announce a "birthday" and she would move on to the next size of everything, as needed. If Karen had been deprived of a sense of style, she did not miss it. There were books and magazines at hand, but the people in them and their activities made little sense to her.

Each room's door could be (and at night was) bolted and barred from within. The few weapons Father had collected were taught and shared.

As there was no electricity, kerosene, or propane, lighting was restricted to daylight mostly, which came thinly enough through brush-covered Plexiglass window-well covers. Father knew these skylights were a weakness, but reasoned that he and Karen could not just sit in the dark. They had few candles and no batteries. There was also vodka, which could be burned in an alcohol lamp, but it was reserved for medicinal use – as a topical agent, mostly.

Ventilation had been provided for the original bomb shelter, but Father's ingenuity had not extended to resurrecting it, and they depended on cracking the door and windows from time to time to freshen the air.

In the schoolroom, Karen learned all that Father could think to teach, racking his fading memories and ransacking his small library for a smattering of history, geology, anthropology, geometry, and physics. Father had been college-trained, but then had mostly worked, he said, as a "bus driver." His weaknesses in formal mathematics and in languages became hers as well – but biology he taught her thoroughly, and geography from a topographic atlas and a relief globe. He stressed physical geography especially; he felt she should be able

to forecast weather from cloud formations.

Father saw that she learned physical culture, health, sanitation, first aid and anatomy, and, though he had no military or police background, such lessons in strategy and tactics as he had learned while foraging. In some things she was drilled constantly so that they would be second nature – no, first nature. Bone deep.

Gaps could not be avoided. Karen was not certain of her age, and could not have told anyone the year. Rudimentary political science had been discussed, but civics had gone by the bye – there was no flag to pledge allegiance to.

Though she was mostly a shut-in, Karen was no stranger to map-and-compass, and to archery of a sort, within the confines of the training room. She understood firearms as a last-last resort; the noise could bring even more unwanted attention too easily.

Her few excursions, all closely supervised, had been into a wilderness in which there were coyotes and other animals, but no people, and in which the landmarks – shells of burnt-out homes, mostly – made less impression on her than did the mountain ranges and river valleys in her atlas. Dry-country trees and brush had sprouted up everywhere; each year all places began to look more and more alike.

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At four in the morning, the night of March 11th, 2048, Karen swam slowly up from an interminable dream with a vague sense of alarm. Doll and frogs and a puddle – what? Dawn usually was what roused her, but there was no light through her small Plexiglass window. What had wakened her?

A muffled thump came from Father's room. And another. And another. Then quiet.

Karen rose from her futon and tiptoed to the bolted and barred steel door. Placing her ear against it, she heard someone speaking – and another *answered*. Neither voice was Father's!

The shock froze her momentarily to the spot. Then the voices were quite near the door and she could hear them plainly. They must think the sound could not carry so well.

"Never mind that, it's steel and you can bet it's locked six ways from Sunday. See the other door? He must have been a clever old shit. Been here decades, it looks like."

He must have been.

"I'll go get the sledgehammer. Them concrete blocks won't hold up long."

Time to go.

Karen knew where everything was in the dark; not that it was entirely dark. Light flickered underneath the door. A torch? Padding

softly back past the futon, Karen slipped off her hoodie, put on a tee shirt and a man's wool shirt with double pockets, then squirmed back into her hoodie. Her jeans, belt and sheath, with an old Schrade skinner, well honed, she already had on, having long ago learned to sleep in them. She put on the socks that lay across her homemade boots, then the boots, double laced, and went to her dresser.

Her hands were shaking so badly – how could she do this? Remembering her training, she breathed deeply three times.

From behind her came the sound of iron against cement. Pieces of cinder block were falling into the inside of the wall.

From beside the dresser, the girl picked up her bow – a child's model, they'd never found better. Twenty pounds of draw would be sufficient, however. She strung it and pulled a handful of arrows from the quiver on the floor. She laid the arrows on the dresser. She felt for, and found, her wool cap. Gloves into hoodie pockets. The heavy little pocket holster to the right front jeans pocket. *Last-last*. Backpack, always ready, with food and full water bottles, down from wall peg. Over to window-well, lugging backpack in one hand, bow and a couple of arrows in the other. Six more were clipped to the backpack.

The door rattled, and with a crash the wall cracked and cement fell and skittered across the floor. *Must gain time!* Karen turned and knocked a broadhead as she did so. Her hands were steadier now. The hammer struck again, and its head showed briefly in the hole. As it withdrew to strike another blow, she loosed the arrow into the gap.

There was an audible gasp, and then someone began screaming. One or more others were shouting.

Remember not to stay and fight if there is any way out, Father had said. Defense, other things being equal, generally does not turn out well. Your choices are to go on the offensive or run. If you can find a way to run, run!

Karen reached up and cranked open the skylight as quickly as it would go. Cold air poured in from the night as she shoved the backpack out. Feeling her exposure to the open hole in the wall behind her – only the darkness of her room offered protection – and the risk of the night above – what if there were more of them up there? *What if they had dogs?* She pushed her bow out and tossed the arrow after it.

Committed now.

Doll, her beloved one-eared pink bunny, was sitting on the top step of Karen's step ladder. With a sweep of her arrow hand, the girl knocked her childhood onto the floor, then hauled herself out the skylight behind her gear.

Fog. And a new moon. Those would help. But the sky was already lightening, and a few sleepy birds were testing their dawn notes.

The young woman swung her pack up, shrugged into her shoulder

straps and snapped her hip belt's buckle, then took up the bow and the arrow. Some instinct or bit of training made her choose to go left instead of right, past her father's window, instead of directly away, which they could guess and follow. Yet another risk; she would be briefly illuminated. Only surprise would avail, and her relatively greater knowledge of the terrain. *Had they found his revolver yet?*

Someone was already climbing up to the window. She faced her silhouetted foe for only a brief moment, and loosed the arrow into the shadow. Something fell backward into the faint light, and there were curses. There! That would hold them for a bit.

Not waiting to see the effect of her shot, Karen Rutledge, age fourteen, turned and ran from what had once been Davis, California.

∴

The sleeping sixteen-year-old woman opened her eyes and, for a few moments, thought of nothing at all. She had always been a light sleeper, and that had, in the last two years, served her well. But waking was her weak point – it took time, and one could not always expect to have that on one's side. Daylight filtered down through the low-sweeping boughs of the ancient cedar.

She could hear the little river, talking softly to itself over there somewhere. Thoughts began to bubble up. Well, nothing had come to eat her in the darkness – or had really even tried, in all this time – except maybe that one night. *Hundreds of miles from here. So long ago.* She felt a kinship with her father's silence about her mother. If anyone had asked Karen about him – could she speak?

She wondered. Would she ever cry?

∴

Pulling together her gear, Karen eased out from the deep shadow of the old cedar and stood in the warm sunshine, looking, listening, and sniffing. She stretched.

All clear. Maybe. Keep checking.

But a chance to do some bodily functions, wash her face, and take inventory.

The inventory was worrisome. She'd managed to either hold onto or replace most of her backpack items – spare jeans and pullover, trash bags to use as rain gear, her father's compass, a treasured and tattered "space" blanket, a flint-and-steel gadget with a handle made from a deer antler (where had Father found that? or did he make it?), dryer-lint and candle-wax tinder, some other things, including, notably, her ceramic filter straw.

But food was in worse than short supply.

She'd started her journey two years ago. In the Sacramento Valley, food had been a constant concern. All grocery and convenience stores had been cleaned to the walls. Gardens were long gone, though she did discover Jerusalem artichokes, a few other volunteer vegetables, and some neglected fruit trees. Farming seemed to have ground to a halt in many places; equipment sat abandoned in the open, and brush and saplings had invaded the fields. Fences were down everywhere, and few farm or game animals were to be found.

Along the freeway corridor there had once been horrors. First, there had been a traffic jam. And it had stayed jammed. Then the cars were abandoned and everyone had tried to go on, on foot and badly equipped. Remnants of high-heeled shoes lay among thistles.

People had died in droves; of what, she generally had no idea. It all seemed to have happened more than a decade ago. Some animals – coyotes? foxes? perhaps even wolves? *humans?* – had scattered bones far and wide. The bones had then begun to blend into the vegetation, turning green with algae.

She would always remember one pair of long bones, a radius and ulna, lying across a truck tire in the hot sun. They were held together by a golden watchband.

"Traffic" had begun to pick up again along there, though. People were passing through, in small groups, almost all of them coming from the south and heading north.

Karen had managed to avoid most of them, by choosing a parallel route in the foothills of the great river valley, first on the west, then crossing under the freeway along a creek, and working her way up past a series of abandoned reservoirs. Water was running over the tops of the dams, between tree trunks piled up every which way.

She was mostly lucky in such people as she did meet. Here in the hills they mostly weren't a blood-*thirsty* lot. Men, she was learning, were often a clear and present danger, so she sought out women. Some offered temporary shelter in a barn or outbuilding, and well water. But few offered to share much food.

That was fair. She had little offer herself.

She had become adept at exploring out-of-the-way houses for caches of food. Often, for whatever reason, the occupants had gone away without finding a way to take it all with them, or bothering to hide it well in case they might return.

Most was useless. Everything in freezers, refrigerators, plastic bags or bottles, net bags, and cardboard boxes was a total loss. No one seemed to have stockpiled anything freeze-dried and foil-packed. The stuff in the occasional pantry full of ranks of filled Mason jars was of very uneven quality and some of it had become dangerous. Most tin cans were still reliable, however, though in many cases they had had paper labels that had fallen off and disintegrated.

One never knew what was for dinner. Sometimes beets, beets and beets. Or cat food, beets and refried beans.

She didn't complain.

...

In the two long winters, Karen holed up in cabins tucked into box canyons on the western slope of the mountains. She added to her skills. Grouse, which had exploded in population, and mule deer, which were making a comeback, became available.

It had become necessary to use fire. The second winter, that column of smoke had led to a very close call, and she'd had to abandon her freehold in the middle of a snowstorm. She'd come, limping and bleeding, to a house in another valley, where a woman was willing to take her in, tend her wounds, and – most miraculous of all – share food.

The woman had been dying, slowly, and perhaps this, along with the loneliness, had spurred her generosity. Karen understood that the nursing and the feeding were not entirely gratis – in return for these, she would provide hospice nursing and then a "proper burial." Something to do with a terror of having one's body gnawed and scattered by "critters."

Once Karen was alone again, she packed as much high-calorie canned goods as she could well carry, and, thinking she might try her luck on the east side of the mountains, had gone over a pass.

It had not turned out well. People on this side had horses and dogs, and they seemed to be into hunting other people. So here she was, a little farther north, coming west again, and out of food. She'd only been able to re-cross the mountains by arriving at the right season; red and blue huckleberries were having a banner year, and small long-unfished lakes and ponds teemed with relatively easy protein.

Were it not for the hordes of mosquitoes, which bit her unmercifully as she walked along, she could have appreciated her advantages more. She could only hope they would not make her sick – she'd read that they could.

But other game, and other fruit, seemed hard to find in the high places, and it would not be good for the cold to find her here. Small maples of some kind were blushing beneath the canopy along the streams and the overgrown roads. Evenings were chillier; mists hovered over the little lakes in the mornings.

By now, she knew to heed these signs.

With her staff in one hand, and strung bow in the other, she padded back down to the sandy stretch by the little river. It probably had once had a name, but was too small to show on the highway map, torn from an old road atlas, that she had with her. She checked the sand for tracks – her own she had wiped away before retiring for the night.

Nothing but a raccoon had been by, apparently. Not that Karen would have worried much on finding bear or even cougar tracks. Cougars seemed to like tracking her – feline curiosity? But most everything seemed mostly to be on a live-and-let-live basis. Down there – wherever the stream led – things might be different.

Humans, though very seldom encountered, were always the wild card.

Karen parked her backpack under cover and checked the stream for fish and crayfish, but not much was doing, in spite of the cleanliness of the water. She doubted she could keep herself fed with caddis larvae and the tiny black water snails that were crawling about on the round underwater rocks. There was nothing for it but to head downstream with a growling tummy, and keep an eye out for late thimbleberries. She'd already drunk the last of her emergency bottle of Karo syrup two days ago.

Hoisting her pack onto a fallen log so as to shrug into the straps and buckle up, she began the trek. Keeping to the hillside above the riverbank, she used deer trails, walking whenever possible on logs, small rocks, or tufts of bear grass. She didn't know what the plants were called, but knew they helped make her harder to track. Not unless she heard dogs would she take to the water. Too much danger of falling, of re-injuring her leg, of getting wet and losing needed body heat. What with stopping every few hundred yards to look, listen and feel out her surroundings for any hint of malevolence, it was going to take all day to get down from here.

...

It took *three* days.

Fortunately the weather held. The moon was getting brighter each starry night, so she made long days of it, but these mountains, such a gentle, unimpeded climb on their east slope, were, on the west, steep, dark, gnarly with vegetation, and covered with loose scree that delighted in turning underfoot. It was slow and exhausting going.

With what few berries she'd found, and one small trout that she had spotted stranded in a tiny side pool of the riffles and eaten on the spot, Karen was feeling bone-tired and giddy when she struck a trail too regular to be a product of the skittery activities of deer. No longer able to watch with her customary care, she trudged along, as the stream at her right hand, which been rattling with rapids and rumbling over small waterfalls, quieted down and lilted over the roots of large mountain alders and towering cottonwoods.

This would be the valley. So nice of the people here to make a trail that she could travel without constantly stooping and climbing under and over the vegetation – oh!

How long have I been like this? Better pay attention!

She stopped; looked, listened, and "felt." She believed, after many otherwise inexplicable experiences, that her skin knew not only touch, but another sense akin to sight – one could almost "see" around the next bend; certainly one could tell if there were watchers. But on so little food, this sense became unreliable. She would just have to try harder.

There was a bit of watching up and to the left, among the Douglas firs there – but it was almost certainly deer, waiting for dusk to come out and feed. No use checking; she'd passed the point of no return for strength and patience to hunt, and they were on to her anyway. She scanned ahead.

Ah, *there's* the problem. Too much light there. A clearing.
And very likely artificial.

No help for it, then. Must go up to the ridge and reconnoiter.

Halfway to the place she'd chosen, Karen knew she was in trouble – not able, on the low-calorie regime of the last week, to climb with the loaded pack. She'd have to stash and retrieve. And in this tangle, it was possible to miss her way and lose everything.

Slipping off her pack, she dropped it amid a patch of dead bracken. Marking the spot and her route with bent twigs, and taking her bow, two broadheads, a half-empty water bottle and her monocular, she scabbled and clawed to a rocky point near the Douglas firs. Yes, there were deer, two or three. They snorted at her impertinence and moved off along the saddle to the east.

It would take more reserves of strength than Karen had to track them. She ignored them and eased up the back side of the point. The late afternoon sun slanted through a mackerel sky – rain soon? – throwing a long purple shadow behind her on lower ground as she squinted at the unaccustomed brightness, then studied the scene before her.

First use the naked eye, Father had taught her. It's wide angle. Notice any movement first, then notice points of interest. Use the monocular only when you feel you have to. It gives you tunnel vision – cuts off peripheral vision, and you need as much of that as you can keep.

Okay, it's a clearing. Two clearings. Some more cottonwoods, then the stream cuts around the foot of the ridge out of sight to the left –

Well! That's a sight.

Someone has been farming. And there are buildings.

And I smell smoke.

She'd have to make camp on the saddle, watch, and think. It would be a close thing. How was she going to get anything to eat? And how keep warm? Rain was coming; and after that, a full moon – which very likely would be the first frost moon.

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Tomma James and Vernie Watkin walked into the milking house. Mrs. Ames looked up, smiling. She liked these boys. Tomma, summer-tanned, slim, lanky, blue-eyed, braided blond hair, cheery and bumptious. Vernie, stocky, quiet – reserved or bashful, she was never sure – much shorter, with brown, frizzled, closely cropped hair, brown eyes, brown skin the same summer and winter, serious. Not alike in any way, except, which was always important, that they were both willing workers, these two had been best friends since both were two years old. And that was – oh, my! Fifteen years ago.

Neither had married, though most did nowadays by the time they were thirteen. *Close* friends. Starvation Creek's elders might not openly care for that; they put a premium on child-rearing just as they did on stock-rearing. But these two made a strong team and had opted for patrol work. They had earned the respect of a mostly conservative community.

"Somebody reach me a bucket." She chuckled. "I always seem like I sit down before I have it with me, and I'm not as *spry* as I used to be."

Vernie put the milk bucket beside her as she groped underneath Florence, a small, placid Devon cow. Mrs. Ames – she still liked to be called that, though she'd been long widowed – noticed that he wasn't smiling. Neither was Tomma.

"Something's up?" she asked. She pushed aside a strand of gray hair that had escaped the bun at the back of her head and looked at them expectantly.

Tomma made a long face. Whatever that meant, Vernie nodded his agreement. Mrs. Ames looked from one to the other. This was taking them longer than usual.

"There's somebody out there on the spur," Tomma suddenly blurted.

"On th' Ridge?" She dropped her hand; it struck the bucket, which skittered underneath Florence unheeded.

"We, uh, think it's a girl. And, umm ... " Tomma glanced at Vernie, who calmly gazed right back, leaving the ball with Tomma.

"Been there a coupla days. We *think* she might be by herself. And – that *maybe* she's come down the creek."

Mrs. Ames' eyebrows shot up. She rocked back on the milking stool with her hands on her knees. "From th' *east*?"

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Tom Chaney, an elder of Starvation Creek, had not much liked the name his family had given him, back before the Undoing. Other children had taunted him, saying it was the name of a cowardly killer

in a new movie by the Coen brothers. But he reckoned that, in a way, the name had done him good.

He'd worked to remake the name's meaning, by seeking out ways to make himself known both for courage and for giving, not taking away, life. Seeking credentials for a medical education, he'd become an Army medic. His timing was poor, for it led him to take part in a war of which he did not approve, patching the bodies of younger men, and women, some of whom had crossed the Rio Grande to carry out a policy of interdiction by incursion; the others, if they were conscious, spoke Spanish.

The battles had not been battles so much as killing fields – the last gratuitous demonstrations of the United States' industrial wizardry. Dish-equipped Strykers had flooded Tijuana with amped-up microwaves as robotic snipercopters droned overhead.

Chaney's job was triage, determining who was too damaged to save and whom to send north on mercy flights. He had become aware that, though he tagged friend and foe alike, those who hauled away the gurneys sneered when they were given Mexicans.

Where were they taking them? He suddenly wondered. Tom never got a chance to find out. His field hospital's position had suddenly been taken under sustained small arms fire, well behind the lines in El Paso, and things had gotten complex. Somehow or other he'd been handed a Bronze Star, just in time for such medals to begin losing their meaning, even to those who might want one.

He hadn't kept the Bronze Star. But he remembered the childish quest that had led him into that disaster. Perhaps he had at least cleared his name.

Though he'd never had time to qualify as more than a Certified Nurse Practitioner, he was now, by default, the doctor of Starvation Creek. Also counselor, dentist and veterinarian. Some one hundred and eighty children, women, men, and a thousand or more animals, among them cattle, horses, sheep, chickens, and one creek full of migratory fish relied on him for, if not direct care, cheap advice and a kind word. It kept him in eggs.

At his age, eggs were a comfort. Bent, white-haired, and craggy, with the aches and pains of advanced age, he was all of fifty. He hadn't met many other fifty-year olds lately.

Speak of the devil! One of those other ancients was walking into the farmhouse-cum-clinic even as Tom thought this.

"Hello, Tom."

"Carey." Carey Murchison, another Elder, held responsibilities relating to the defense of Starvation Creek. He'd be here on business.

Murchison, completely bald, craggier than Chaney and wider of body than most nowadays, had been a Marine sergeant and served two tours in Kazakhstan. Having been exposed to considerable quantities

of "depleted" uranium and clouds of dust bearing isotopes, he was also in the early stages of bone cancer, and it would be fatal – information yet known only to the two of them. Tom sometimes did not agree with the old warrior's views but he admired him, and they maintained a wary but genuine friendship. The Creekers, as they called themselves, designated him Captain Murchison. He had scowled the first few times he'd heard it, but the "rank" stuck.

They stood by the large window – made from an old sliding glass door – in the wall between the infirmary and a small room that contained two beds, a table and a couple of dining room chairs. In one of the beds lay a sleeping woman, not yet twenty by her looks. In the chair sat Mrs. Ames, reading a tattered Louis L'Amour novel.

"Still in quarantine?"

"Yes, all routine. I think it was mostly hypothermia, hunger and thirst, though she also had quite a few parasites. Much of her diet appears to have been small game – eaten raw. Mrs. Ames is her volunteer, and they get along well. Our tests, such as we've been able to do, indicate she's not a danger. If anything, *we* shouldn't breathe on *her*; she's been that isolated. *Well* isolated; no cleft palate, no other deformations, no pox marks. They should be able to leave quarantine soon."

Murchison's head tilted back slightly, and the corners of his mouth held a hint of frown. "As in she doesn't have smallpox, tuberculosis, bubonic or pneumonic plague, or anthrax, or measles, or polio. Danger comes in other forms, Doctor."

"I understand you. It's what anyone has to consider. But I remind you," he smiled, "that it has been your policy to recruit from among strangers, and it is why we have enough labor here to carry out your schemes."

"True. And we've been damned lucky. It's rough out there." The old Marine moved to the table. "I've been Downstream, so I'm just catching up here. May I look through these items?" He awaited, and received, an affirmative reply.

The question was not entirely perfunctory. It was courtesy to ask; Karen's possessions were her own, in the eyes of all the community. They were in the doctor's hands only because there had been the precautions of cleanliness – along with need-to-know.

The first thing that came to Captain Murchison's hand was one of the arrows.

"Carbon Express dual fixed blade broadhead. Look at the fletching."

"Kept clean. I'm told for two years."

"In the field, no less. This thing is thirty years old if it's a day, and it would have cost a fortune then." He laid it down and took up another. "Now, this is just a common field point, much cheaper manufacture, might have come with the bow." He nodded toward the corner where

the unstrung bow, an inexpensive light green fiberglass model, stood. "Eclectic. Assembled during or after the Undoing?"

"She says her father, a Mr. Rutledge, equipped her, as opportunity brought things to his hand, a decade ago."

"Nice work. I wish he'd come with her."

"He's almost certainly no longer living."

Captain Murchison's glance in reply carried meaning for them both. Rutledge, assuming her story were true, had had a relatively merciful and quick ending. Murchison's impending doom seemed cruel by comparison. Such, they both thought, is life.

He picked up a small roll of duct tape. "Repair kit and medical kit."

"Yes."

The Captain swept his hand to indicate the entire table's contents. "All the way across the Cascades, alone. On peaches in syrup, Spaghetti-O's, Alpo, trout, ground squirrels, berries and bugs, I'm told. Then holds off our scouts in a driving rain for three days running, wearing nothing but these – " he indicated a tiny, neatly folded pile of clean laundry – "a trash-bag poncho, and a square of Mylar. Could any of *us* do it?"

"No. We farmers may be getting soft, do you think?" Tom laughed.

"And then there's *this*." The old sergeant of Marines picked up the pocket holster and slipped out the strikingly small semi-automatic pistol that lay within. He pressed the magazine release button, glanced at the empty magazine, racked the slide, and looked into the empty chamber. He held up the pistol beneath the skylight for a better look.

"Kel-Tec CNC Inc P3AT Cal .380 Auto Cocoa FL Made in USA," he read aloud. "This weapon has been fired and cleaned. Who unloaded it?"

"Tomma."

"And these were in it?" Seven rounds lay in a small dish on the table. "Carries with one in the chamber."

"Mm-hmm."

"Damn." Murchison held up one to the light. "Hornadys. Apparently the primers are still good." He aimed the tiny pistol toward the wall, away from Tom. "These nasty little things are bare bones, no sights to speak of, no safety. Very high recoil, hard to practice with. Yet I have a feeling she knows it the way she knows her bow. How come nobody got hurt up there?" He gestured toward Starvation Ridge, which filled the south window.

"The kids say she never showed it. Kept to her bow. They stayed well away and under cover, talked to her, but she couldn't be persuaded to come down. The rain and exposure was what wore her out, along with simple starvation."

"On Starvation Ridge, no less." Murchison almost smiled.

"Seriously, though – disciplined. But nobody can fight Momma

Nature forever. And this must be her reserve ammunition." Murchison picked up a translucent polyethylene thirty-five millimeter film can that showed a hint of metal within. He popped off the cap, and found cotton wadding stuffed inside, apparently to keep the cartridges from rattling. He shook out the four remaining rounds and found a small packet of silica gel.

He whistled. Then laughed. "Got us Creekers beat for ideas, and, you know, I thought we were pretty good." Then, lowering his voice, "So, you think she's told her whole story? And all on the level?"

"Well, no, not the whole story. There's a deep reserve, a lot of emotional blockage, wariness. She's very reticent, even with Mrs. Ames. But she seems truthful in what she chooses to tell. If she has fired in anger, it would seem to have occurred at one of her winter holdouts or on the Eastside. Apparently it's as bad over there as it is Downstream." Tom trudged over to the window and looked at the sleeping girl, then turned back. "I *don't* think she's paramilitary or a bandit. I can tell you Karen's been shot twice herself and knifed once. And yet she has no STD and has never been pregnant."

Captain Murchison might, at this point, have said something incredulous, but as he looked at Tom, he saw that the thin, dark-eyed, freckle-faced girl, in a "hospital gown" sewn from an old sheet, was standing at the window, right behind the doctor, looking intently into Murchison's face, then at the little pistol still in his hand, then into his face again.

Carey knew that every moment mattered in reaching out to such a creature. Mistakes could be costly to all concerned.

He pointed to the pistol and smiled, picked up the magazine and inserted it gently, not with a palm-smack that might shear off its thin plastic magazine catch. He racked it once to show her there was nothing in the chamber, then pointed to the ammunition and restored the pistol to its holster. Then he pointed to her and again to her possessions and gave her a thumbs-up salute. She did not smile, but she understood the pantomime. He respected her gear, therefore he respected her. He felt quite sure that if he had failed to communicate this successfully, she might have calmly gone for one of the chairs and put it through the window. He would not venture to predict what would have happened next.

Mrs. Ames had put down her book, and was watching. Karen spoke to her without turning from the window, and she replied. After a few more words with Dr. Tom, Carey Murchison waved to her and walked casually to the house's front door.

Karen's eyes did not leave his broad back until he had left the infirmary.

"Who is that man?" Karen asked Mrs. Ames.

"He's the Captain, dear; keeps some of th' young people busy with

making sure trouble don't come up here from th' Valley." *Be candid*, the doctor had instructed her. *But stay away from details, especially about Carey's kind of stuff, for now.*

"What's 'the Valley?' The Willamette?" Karen watched him out the door, then relaxed her body and returned to sit on her bed, facing the gray-haired, round-shouldered Mrs. Ames, who had set aside her book and now picked up her knitting.

Needles, aluminum with remnants of purple paint, clicked. A woolen child-sized sweater, in two shades of yarn in a cable pattern, was in progress, something new to Karen, who knew toddlers only from pictures.

"Yes, there were cities down there – like yours." Neither spoke of it, but the unbidden image rose, in both their minds, of the thousands upon thousands of flat-tired cars and trucks, some burned, others not, on the brushy and tree-choked Interstate.

"So ... trouble?"

"Mmh." Clickety-click. "Well, we're *farmers* here. We're doin' pasture, oats, wheat – so we're kind of – tempting, y'might say."

"I haven't seen a lot of farming. Or maybe, *any* farming."

"No, I should think you wouldn't've. With nothin' goin' anywhere, them as had both seed and sense 'ud be far between, hm?"

Karen thought of the riders – the *hunters of people* she'd encountered. In the absence of refrigeration, trade and transportation, Father had said, once all the canned goods and game in an area were depleted, there could be cannibalism, slavery, or both. "You're ..." she searched for her father's terms. "You're a protected high-density resource."

"See, there you go. Sound like y'went t' college but y'use it to talk street smart."

Karen did not know what to say to that. Streets had seemed to her to be something "smart" to stay out of. She drew up her feet from the floor onto the bed, and rested her chin on her knees.

"So, tell me about farming."

"Well – I'll tell you about me." She smiled broadly. "That's my best subject."

Karen made no comment, waited.

Such a somber young woman. "I'm th' old cowgirl," Mrs. Ames went on, needles clacking. "Dexters and Devons. We're breedin' for milk, meat and labor, and as much as possible on pasture and hay." She let go the knitting needle with her right hand and pointed to the wall, east. "The cows have about one hundred twenty acres, fenced and cross fenced ...umm, like this –" making a circle divided into four sections in the air with her finger – and gates. So, in a year, they go from one to th' next, to fresh, clean grass, and th' chickens take over th' one they've just left and clean up after th' cows. Then th' young

folks make hay on th' third one, and th' fourth one 'rests.'"

Karen clearly could not visualize much of that, but she remained polite and focused, though Mrs. Ames could see she was peripherally aware of Dr. Tom, consulting with a patient, through the isolation window. *I should just give up on this no-details thing. She's hungry to know, for herself. Anyone could tell you that.* Pasture rotation, it's called. Doctor Tom read about it somewhere, so we're tryin' it. Doesn't require tractors or fertilizer, y'see."

"You get help with 'haying.' Is that about gathering grass for the cows to eat in winter?"

"Oh you're a good student!" Clackety-click. "That's exactly right; it has to dry so it won't mold or get hot in th' piles and burn. Th' grass them cows eat in winter, in th' rain, doesn't feed 'em much, so we give 'em th' summer grass off th' hayfield in winter. That's me all winter, forking hay out of th' barn loft down to th' ladies, 'n miking morning 'n night, 'n keepin' th' hens 'n gatherin' eggs."

Mrs. Ames sighed. "It's funny, ain't it? Back when, I had Charles 'n th' kids, an' I fed 'em and sent 'em off ev'ry day, 'n then went across town to Denny's and waitressed my butt off – I had my figure then, I was hot stuff. An' now I work harder than I did even then, and here I am round as a pumpkin."

Karen did not ask the whereabouts of "Charles 'n th' kids." "No, I think you look nice just the way you are."

"Thank you, honey. Well, nobody's – *obese* – any more, but I'm *old*; I'm all of forty-eight an' couldn't expect to be pretty forever." Unexpectedly, tears welled up in her eyes and spilled over. The knitting needles stopped.

Karen, who could never remember having done such a thing, crossed over to the weeping Mrs. Ames and put her arm round her.

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"Dr." Tom Chaney, an Elder of Starvation Creek, sat across his "desk," a large oak dining table, from one of the most intense presences he'd ever encountered. He hoped he could will the nonchalance he affected into something like truth; she'd not have much tolerance for insincerity. If any. That hopelessly wild black hair, short because she'd kept it so with that sharp skinning knife, framed a calm face, but seemed to express a wildness coiled within, like a cat's. The morning sun poured golden through the glass between tied-back chenille curtains and onto the floor in a corner.

"I want to thank you for your co-operation in the last week. It was hard for us all; but you seemed to understand about quarantine, which certainly helped a lot."

Karen, dressed in the (washed) clothes in which she'd first come

among the Creekers, took in the room without taking her eyes off Tom. Mrs. Ames' kindly face and person, which sat relaxed in a chair beside Karen's, was a help. Karen was not yet prepared to sit alone in a room with any man, even one whose to whom professionalism apparently came first.

"It's all right; my father had told me expect as much most anywhere. Or ... worse. Generally I have seen worse."

"Have you given thought to where you wish to go next? We can escort you to our 'borders', if it is what you wish."

"I was trespassing, I know. But ... you see how it was."

Tom nodded to the window, beyond which lay the mountain, where maples amid the dark firs had begun to shade, in the soft light, into their first touches of autumn color.

"Well, consider your circumstances at the time. After such a journey, with so few provisions, any one of *us* would have done the same." He watched as she considered the question that had been asked.

"I know that ... that as one who travels, that I shouldn't ..." Here she looked as if she might stammer, which he did not expect from one so self-possessed. What must it be like, to have grown up underground? And then to have to apply rote learning to such different surroundings? To attempt to speak courteously to courteous strangers, with no background in the ways? Tom could wait for her to find her words.

She began anew. "I am mine, and all of you are *yours*. So I want to ask, to ... to *ask*. It doesn't ..." She looked to Mrs. Ames, who seemed anxious to encourage.

"Honey," Mrs. Ames patted the arm of Karen's chair. "do you wanta get to know us enough to find out if you'd like to stay awhile?"

Karen's body visibly relaxed a little. "Well, that's close enough. I mean, to begin with, you've all fed and cared for me for days; shouldn't I do some work or something to make a return? And then I might know more about what I *could* do next."

Tom leaned back in his chair and laughed. "You'd like some chores, maybe study us a bit. I think something could be arranged. We can share enough, about us, that it would help inform your decisions, and yet not share so much as to make you a danger to us should you choose to move on. Something like that?"

Karen thought this over, then nodded.

"Very good," said the doctor. "You should know that, of course, there's been a council over your presence among us, and that what you're requesting is much the same as what we decided was our hope as well. Is that about right?" he looked to Mrs. Ames.

"You got it," she said. "Karen, if you'd like to put up with me for awhile, I'm bettin' we'd find plenty for you to do, 'n some young

people to meet, too."

"Put up with?" Idiomatic speech was still a difficulty for Karen.

"Girl, it's like you was raised in a bottle! Why don't we grab your stuff and we'll go over to my place 'n have some eggs and broccoli?"

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Mrs. Ames' place was several miles east of the infirmary and one of the last that Karen could see in that direction, as they approached.

Agricultural fields seemed to be laid out to left and right from the road in narrow strips, each with its own access gate along the road, with perhaps a small log bridge across a ditch. Fruit and walnut trees lined the road, and blackberries and grapevines had been encouraged along all the fence lines.

Wooden frame houses along the valley appeared to have been built, in the old times, about every quarter mile. Some of these had metallic "mobile" homes close by, and a few outbuildings and perhaps a barn. New structures, often of logs, clustered round these, so that the valley's population density was concentrated along the road, which was devolving into an oxcart path. Many places, farther from the main road, had been abandoned and then salvaged. Often only a cluster of oaks with lilacs and flowering quince showed where someone had lived, or a line of utility poles that had long been stripped of wire.

The area was becoming a village.

Karen began to recognize what Creekers looked like, as they met a few along the road. Men and women alike wore trousers and tunics that looked homespun from wool or some other spun yarn or thread, in earth-tone solid colors, and cut to simple patterns. Sheath knives were much in evidence, along with belt pouches. Most often they pushed or pulled old metal or new wooden wheelbarrows or carts, laden with early fall produce, or carried hand tools such as scythes, forks, or hoes.

People appeared, like some in old *National Geographics* Karen had studied, to have a variety of ethnic backgrounds. This was rare in Karen's experience; something had happened, in the early days of the Undoing, to many who were not white. As someone of mixed background herself, she knew it was significant. Whatever terrible things had been happening to non-whites elsewhere had not happened here. Some stopped to chat briefly with Mrs. Ames and to greet the newcomer. Others simply nodded and passed on by. Only one couple had children.

Small children had been, to Karen, such a rare sight that these she studied with interest. Like their parents, they were black, with eyes brown as hers, but much darker skin. The boy and girl, half her height, were as shy as she was herself, and hid behind the woman, who

looked to Karen to be no older than she. All four of the family carried buckets of blackberries.

"Gettin' 'em in for th' winter, hm?" asked Mrs. Ames.

"We are," said the young man, who must be the father, for both children resembled him closely. "We were late getting out for the berries, as the house wasn't done until last quarter moon."

"An' you're in snug, and you'll keep warm?"

"There isn't much wood in the pile yet, and what there is, is green; and there's little food, but we can eat at the mess hall and stay warm there in the winter if we have to."

The mother joined in, with a rich, high voice and an accent new to Karen and beautiful to her ears. "We will be picking apples along the road all tomorrow, and some pears are left; should we bring you some when we come for the milk?"

"You do that; we're out of everythin' but what comes straight from th' cows, but these two c'n shake some butter out for you, I bet." She beamed on the young ones, who grinned back. "An' pick some kale, too; there's lots."

All took their leaves from one another, walking at what seemed to Karen a slow and deliberate pace, but she found this appropriate. Her backpack, though it had only gear in and on it and no provisions, was heavy to her after the last week or so of inactivity, and dug into her narrow shoulders; her legs felt rubbery and she was footsore. The sun, too, was higher now and very warm, and sweat began to sting her eyes.

Mrs. Ames could see the young woman's difficulty. "How ya doin'?"

"I'm all right. My strength must be down."

"I should think so; we're almost there and we'll go straight to the kitchen."

The house was one of the frame houses and was surrounded by a barn, a pumphouse, a chicken shed, and two of the little log cabins, with another under construction. In a field beyond, Karen could see a few cows; "red" ones of different sizes. The day was already hot in the fields, and most of the animals had taken to the shade of trees along the fence line.

Smoke was drifting from a steel chimney at the back of the frame house toward the creek and upstream, fading among cottonwoods.

"That'd be Juanita; she's got th' fire up for some baking and a bit of lunch."

They walked on a grassy path round to the back, and entered the kitchen through a small mudroom filled with boots, shoes, coats, straw hats, and tools.

The kitchen was a step down from the mudroom, as its floor had been removed and the ground beneath leveled and cobbled – cooler in

summer, and able to support the weight of an earthen stove. This room had once been several rooms: a kitchen, a pantry, a hallway, and one of several bedrooms. Walls had been knocked out to accommodate a full-size milkroom as well as the rammed-earth stove and oven. The stove had a sheet-steel top with round "eyes" for frying pans, of which several, along with saucepans, hung from hooks suspended from the ceiling. Shelves held dozens of glass jars of various types, labeled with words like "coriander," "dill," and "marjoram." Ropes of onion and garlic hung along the walls, along with tied bundles of lavender and mint.

A young woman, perhaps a few years older than Karen, crouched by the stove, putting short round sticks into the fire with one hand, and shaking a large steel frying pan over an uncovered eye of the stove with the other. Satisfied with the progress of her fire, she turned to greet Karen. She was, to Karen's eyes, like herself: darker than most of those she'd met, with black hair, brown eyes, a slim face with a wide smile, but with a rounded figure, though very much smaller than Mrs. Ames. And she was wearing a *dress* --which was something Karen had never seen except in pictures -- with a full-length apron.

Karen did not know words for "spring dress of chiffon with pleated skirt detail," nor "embroidered roses," but she found the effect pleasing. Perhaps it was the smile.

"Hi, I'm Juanita Molinero. Hungry?"

Interesting smells, some of them new to Karen, filled the air. Karen shed her backpack and leaned it against the wall next to a table laden with creamery equipment. "Yes. I'm Karen."

"You *are* Karen!" Juanita laughed. "Is there any one who is on the Creek and who does *not* know you are Karen?"

"Is that th' eggs and broccoli?" asked Mrs. Ames, grinning.

"It is the eggs but the broccoli is all gone for this year, so it is the eggs and the kale, the onions, and some tomatoes. The frost was very light and so I think maybe it is a few weeks for the tomatoes yet."

"Here, Karen," directed Mrs. Ames. "You c'n wash up a bit 'n that bowl by th' sink, 'n if you'll set out plates, cups, and forks for -- seven?" -- Juanita nodded -- "I'll go ring th' bell." She disappeared through the mudroom door.

"Bell?"

"It is a music for the hungry. It will bring my husband, my children, and Errol. The others are elsewhere. Tomma and Vernie, they make sure there is no one coming from up there." She nodded up-Creek, toward the foothills of the Cascades.

Where I came from. A *patrol*. Karen stepped across to shelves stacked with mismatched dishes

A clanging commenced. Mrs. Ames was beating a suspended length of iron pipe, which they had passed on the way in, with the poll of a

hatchet.

In a few minutes there were seven washed faces, and seven washed pairs of hands, at the long table in the middle of the kitchen. Though it seemed to Karen hot with the fire still going, everyone else seemed comfortable enough, and the casserole passed from hand to hand, the bowl growing lighter as it stopped at each plate. To drink, there was water, flavored by being left in the sun with peppermint leaves in it. Animated talk seasoned the food.

Errol was introduced, but Karen could not form much of an impression of him. Sandy-haired and rangy, with even more freckles than herself, he was the farm's carpenter, and was working on the new cabin. Much of his work he did alone, whether in construction or woodcutting in summer, or in a skylit room in the barn in winter, creating wooden tools and handles and clogs; she gathered he did not regard it as loneliness but blissful solitude.

Karen was shocked at how old Juanita's children were. Two boys, they seemed almost teens and were already seasoned farm hands. Their father, Emilio Molinero, with a round cheerful face and a sparse beard, explained that he was in charge of finding enough fodder for the cattle and getting water to the pastures and to the cattle as well.

"We have really, here, two seasons, the rain, that is winter and spring, then the sun, which is summer and fall. So there have been many, many days of sun and the grass turns brown and the Creek runs low, and though there was irrigation equipment here when people arrived, there was no way to make pressure."

"Electricity." Karen had read about electricity, but she had yet to see its miraculous powers.

"Exactly, what was in the wires we do not have.. But we have some smart people down the valley here, and they have turned old dead machines into new machines that use the winds, and so we get a little water. Also some we pipe down from a pool in the Creek that is higher up than here. With your permission I will show you."

After the meal, Karen helped Juanita with dishes while Mrs. Ames and Mr. Molinero conferred as to the afternoon's chores. The boys would spend the remainder of the day cutting comfrey for the cows and mucking out the barn; Juanita would prepare dinner and also she had bread rising in the oven ("flat barley cakes; there is not in them so much wheat as we could wish"). Mrs. Ames would visit the chickens and then rest, and she would milk the cows when the boys brought them to the barn.

"You take th' grand tour with Emilio, Karen, and if ya'll help Juanita when ya get back, that'd be dandy," said Mrs. Ames.

Karen walked with the cattleman to the gated pastures. As this was what she had been bidden to do by her friend Mrs. Ames, it must be ordinary and appropriate, and she would endeavor to regard it so. She

also felt naked without her backpack, with its bow and her few arrows, but understood this was a different kind of life – something like, perhaps, what her father had known, before the Undoing. If it was unsafe here, no one seemed to think so – though she remembered that Tomma and Vernie were out there in the woods to the East, listening and watching – for what?

...

Emilio was proud of the farm's achievements. He explained the pasture rotation, of which Karen had heard before, and showed her the chickens in their movable sheds.

"These things are made of 'chicken wire' and PVC pipe, as there was a lot of both available when we began to farm here. The chickens were running wild; the ones that could breed on their own had done so, and so that's the kind we have. It is a mix, now, of Banty and Araucana, we think."

The names meant nothing to Karen; chickens were new to her.

"If we did not have the wire, we would have to find a way to make enclosures, and to bring in enough food for them. If they continued to run loose as they were doing before, there would be many lost to hawks, wild dogs, coyotes, foxes, raccoons and bobcats. Even the eagles seem interested."

He led her through a gate in an overgrown fence to another pasture, and here were the cows. The shadows were lengthening, and temperatures were dropping a bit in the afternoon breeze, and so the cattle were getting up from the shade and lazily moving toward a water tank, re-purposed from a hot tub, near one of the small windmills dotted around.

"These are a few Devon-Dexter-Whiteface cows. There were Devons and Dexters here when we got here. The Devons were a great surprise; I am told they were rare even before the Undoing. The only bull we could locate for them was a Whiteface. He makes them too much beefy but we get some milk, and some young steers we butcher, and it is a big help. The rest pull farm implements and carts. What we would do here if the people who lived in this valley had killed and eaten everything and *then* left, I do not know. It is a wonder there is so much to work with."

Emilio waved at the fence line behind them. "The wire is irreplaceable, so we are encouraging hedges. This is blackberry, wild rose, black hawthorn, red grapes, and yellow plum trees mostly. Blackberries, plums, rose hips, a little firewood, and ... rabbits."

He smiled. "Down the valley there is a lady working to domesticate and raise these rabbits. They are not a domestic breed, but we must start somewhere."

"Wasn't there something about a disease in cottontails?" asked Karen, who had read this in an old magazine.

"I have heard that, too, but we have not seen a problem yet."

Emilio knitted his brows. "It has been do-what-we-can and not do-what-we-should, here. There are it may be close to two hundred of us. All food is *life*. It is not enough muscles here to raise enough food, and yet too much muscles to feed. So we forage and hunt and fish, as the things that live here have increased since the Undoing. The weather seems different, too, than it once was, and there are crop failures. We all work very hard. This has been our best year."

"The failures ... is that why this is called Starvation Creek?"

"Oh – ha ha. Apropos, no? but no, it is named so on an old map. You see the long mountain there?" He pointed to the fir-clad ridge, with its long spine of exposed rock at the top.

"Mm-hmm."

"Of course; you were there before. I am told that long ago a shepherd was caught there in deep snow with some of his flock, and so he could not come down for a long time and to live, he ate some of the sheep, which made his boss angry. But what could he do, eh?" Emilio smiled again, and Karen felt herself smiling in return – a new sensation for her.

"How many years have you farmed here?"

"I am a late arrival myself, but I understand it is seventeen years, this thing. A few people, then more. To farm without diesel or gasoline – not so many knew how to do it. There were a few books, and some elders can read. The rest has been the hard school."

"Experience."

"Yes, and many mistakes. It is not a certain thing, all this work. Failure of a crop, and where will we get enough seed?"

Karen thought of all the "foraging" she had done in abandoned cellars and pantries. A vanishing resource. "There must not be any canned goods any more; not after seventeen years." They walked down toward the next hedge.

"That is very correct, and I see you understand the implications. You have traveled, and so you must know what it is that some people will eat when all of the foods, the crops and the animals are gone."

This was very direct, but it was a fact and facts were to be faced.

Karen was not sure what could or should be asked, but the thought of the two young men, risking their lives, perhaps, to look and listen in the woods upstream brought a question to her lips.

"You say you came late. Did Juanita and the boys come with you?"

"No, I met her here. Raul and David are fraternal twins, and they are natives, born here." Emilio smiled again, but grimly, thought Karen. "When I came to the Creek I was younger than they are now. Late means there was already an established ..."

"Community?"

"An excellent word, I thank you. When I say it has not been easy here, I do not say that it has not been good. It has been so very good, thank-you-Jeeah."

Karen did not ask about the last phrase. Father had taught her to be leery of religions above almost all else, and this sounded like religion.

Emilio opened another gate and they stepped through and stopped. Karen could see acres of broad-leaved plants before them, and a little way farther on, another frame house with a barn, a trailer house and two of the little log houses on either side. Vegetable gardens surrounded the farmhouse, and smoke rose from a mud-and stick chimney added on to the back. The roof of the house had been done over in large cedar shakes.

Emilio turned to Karen, his eyes like dark pools, shining. But there was in them no smile.

"I was, maybe, nine or ten. We do not know. I was found by the Captain in a cage in the encampment of some bandits who were testing the Creek's defenses, over to the west. And my memories from before that do not come to me."

"You were ..." Karen felt the back of her neck grow cold.

"I was to be food, yes. But those particular bandits are no more, mh? So. Over here, we have pumpkins, beets and comfrey, for the cattle in the winter, and it is the responsibility of the Jones household. Beyond Mr. Jones is the Beemans place, oats and buckwheat this year, and a few sheep. And so on, all the way down to the 'mess hall', as it is called. But I do not see the boys, though I can see where they have been cutting the comfrey, so I think we will go back now."

∴

At the house, dinner proved to be a small wooden bowl of soup, made from leftover egg, kale, onion, tomato and barley, washed down with more of the weak mint tea, with a hint of wild ginger. If Karen hoped to get fresh barley bread, there was none in evidence.

"Enjoy," said Juanita, with laughing eyes. She had seen Karen's furtive survey of the kitchen. "We have for dinner what we had for lunch, only less of it, and usually simmered in the water. When there is more milk, maybe some of that, too, though usually early in the morning. Lunch is the big meal." She stepped over to the open firepit of the stove and threw on a couple of pieces of hardwood.

"Where is everyone?"

"Errol is making axe-handles I think, and so he has not been here for his bowl. Sometimes he does not come. The boys have eaten and run, and my 'oldest' is helping Mrs. Ames in the barn; it is long daylight yet so we do what we can at this time of the year."

"Yes. The dark days will be coming soon enough. 'Oldest?'"

Juanita laughed out loud, a sound that lifted Karen's spirits. Father had not been one to laugh, and laughter that she had heard on the Eastside had been meant to intimidate.

"Ah, you know they were born together; Emilio seems so proud of this. Well. Raul appeared first and then David; so we have a first-born and a second born. David is on the lookout."

"Oh. Is that the big box on the wooden pole?" Karen had noted this upon her arrival, but had not known what to make of it.

"It is so; and why not give to me your bowl and then I will show you where to take your things for the night, yes?"

This proved to be upstairs in the main house, in a room with a slanted ceiling and a dormer window looking east. Very tiny; but Karen liked it right away.

The floor, walls and ceiling were painted white with something chalky but cleanly. The door, she noted with approval, could be not only bolted but barred from the inside – and not from the outside.

There was, by the door, a small, very dark wooden table with one drawer and on it an aluminum pitcher of water and a steel bowl. A towel-rack had been affixed to the table and hanging from this was a clean cloth cut from some fabric of bygone days, with pictures on it of blond children and a small curly-haired dog, all jumping at a multicolored ball.

A small mirror hung on the wall above the table. Karen gave herself a quick peek. That somber face with its wide mouth. She grimaced: teeth still good. She'd learned to cut twigs, chew the end, and brush with them. Hair every which way, as usual. She was less weathered than she had been; the freckles were more prominent. A few scratches and the many insect bites she had sustained in the mountains were healing rapidly.

In the drawer was what must be a rare and valuable thing: a tallow candle, hand-dipped. For emergencies, she was sure. Also she found a block of lye soap. She had indeed come to civilization!

Karen moved to the window and opened it. She stepped out onto the roof, covered with large cedar shakes like the other roof she had seen. This must be how everyone coped with the inevitable failure of many of the old-style roofs.

The breeze had stopped. Sun shone, beneath clouds that had formed in the west, on the slopes of the eastern hills, splashing the endless forests pink and orange. Karen could see that from here, if necessary, she could run down across what must be one of the downstairs bedrooms, and leap to the ground. She'd have to throw her pack first, or her legs might not bear the landing well.

To her right she could see the tall power pole with its added structure, resembling a very large birdhouse of small peeled logs,

assembled log-cabin style. Iron steps, of a kind she had seen on such poles, ranged up to a trapdoor from a point about ten feet from the ground. Someone must take away a ladder for the occupant.

A hand waved to Karen from a tiny opening. She waved back. Looking around near at hand, she could see that the fences around the compound were kept clear of vegetation, and were tall. Some thought, at least, had gone into defense.

But she remembered Father's maxim: *defense, other things being equal, loses*. Surely these Creekers, who had lasted seventeen years, one more than she had been alive, had more ideas than she had yet seen. Perhaps one *could* sleep soundly here.

She climbed back in and closed the window. Whatever had happened here, there had been a clean exodus. Cows and chickens had remained behind uneaten, and the windows had glass! Luxury unheard of.

Across the room she found a tick mattress stuffed with straw, spread with a blanket crocheted from woolen yarn. Small, but there were two other blankets at the foot of the mattress, made from woven wool, one dyed green, the other red. Very nice! By the mattress stood an earthen pot with a matching lid and a steel bail; this must be the "facilities." A "night soil" people; of course, they must use everything. Corncobs in a smaller pot stood by, and a little pile of old cotton cloths. Thoughtful! Someone had already considered monthly flow; but hers had passed a week ago, while she was in convalescence. Which reminded her of how tired she was, still.

Karen unpacked her backpack, inventoried everything, stroked her bowstring with a lump of beeswax, then put everything back together. The bow, being fiberglass, needed nothing.

Yes, she would sleep here, tonight, but with boots on. One never, never knows. After all, it was a *wooden* house.

∴

Near winter is a eff of a time to go campaignin', Wolf thought. *But if anybody is out there, now is th' time to hit 'em up.*

He surveyed his crew. Not much, but where can one find enough men to achieve anything when there's never enough food or potable water and so many diseases keep popping up? And what's the fun trying to build an army when there's almost no ammunition around, any more?

If he hadn't lucked into that intact gun shop in that ghost town in the boonies, he wouldn't be running any kind of serious operation by now – or maybe any kind of operation at all.

The former owners had opted to dome the whole place with steel-reinforced concrete, leaving one opening that was covered with a

well-hidden door salvaged from, apparently, a bank vault, presumably with intent to return and use the building's contents as trade items. Or for their own use over time.

They must have possessed a bulldozer and a crane and fuel to run them with, as well as considerable single-mindedness. He admired them, but there would be no hope of meeting them, no doubt. As usual, they hadn't returned.

With the aid of some terribly crystallized stump powder, his last live cap and a car battery still holding a weak but sufficient charge, and with wire harness ripped from the same car and spliced, he and Mac had made their way in. Correction. He, Wolf, had made his way in. Mac had not survived the break-in.

Oh, well. He wasn't such great company in that jee-dee prison, either.

It had taken so long to find, train, dominate his small army – everyone has to sleep sometime – that the ammunition and working primers had begun to run low at last, and he'd had to resort to scrouncing crossbows and selfbows to keep things hopping.

I s'pose we'll be down to spears and clubs before this is over, he thought wryly. Bet I oughta be looking for guys with bigger shoulders now, stead'a sharper eyes.

Wolf climbed up on a stump and turned around. The column halted. It was a good spot for counting heads; an opening among the copses of ash and cottonwood, and although there was, as there was nearly everywhere now, an awful lot of Scotch broom and teasel crowding the trail in a tangle eight feet high, he could see everyone from the stump.

Twenty-eight. Good, no one had slunk away. 'Course, if they tried, the first one to claim the kill would get the liver. But he didn't expect much trouble; morale was high since they'd landed on that last little pocket of pilgrims. Always going north! What did they think they were all going to find up there? Klondike gold?

"Hey y'all, an' how ya' doin'?"

"We're real good, Wolf," they replied in unison.

'Course you're good, you're alive, ain't ya? Who deserves to live?"

"The living!"

"Yeah, cuz' the dead are in no effin' shape to deserve nothin'. An' that. Is. A. *Fact*; you ever heard the dead tellin' ya 'bout their rights?" Scattered chuckles, not many; they'd heard that one too many times. "Break, till we come get ya. Use th' shade of this maple, an' keep the chatter down to a gentle roar. Secure all your loads and gear. Willits, point. When Burgoyne catches up to us, Bucky, swap with 'im an' go out fifty yards. 'K?"

"S'good, Wolf." Unison again, but not as loud. Mention of the maple showed Wolf's mind: Keep low and quiet and out of sight of

any line of fire. The spot offered no cover but fine concealment.

And the ground was dry.

Though it had been a droughty summer, as usual, they had found entire days of monotonously wet going. Without anyone to maintain ditches and drains, many of the abandoned farms had quickly reverted to wetlands, a problem compounded, though Wolf knew nothing of this, by the absence of personnel at flood regulation dams in the huge watershed. Nothing had stopped the rivers jumping their banks in winter, and often the resulting sheets of water had had nowhere to go, covering roads as well as fields.

Wolf didn't care if he never saw another blue heron as long as he lived.

All sat down, keeping weapons close at hand and unshipping loaded pack frames or pack bags and tumplines. They sipped at water or traded differently-textured bits of jerky.

The men, ranging in age from fourteen to nineteen, were all veterans, proud of their association with Wolf the Lucky, and had adopted several means of quickly distinguishing themselves from potential foes. Few of them had yet grown the luxuriant beard, black streaked with gray in his case, that adorned Wolf's scarred and pitted face; but all sported closely cropped hair in imitation of his premature baldness, and had adopted his practice of streaking his cheekbones with lampblack.

They also had crudely tattooed one another with needles or safety pins, and had learned to tuck bits of ash under the skin of their foreheads, raising welts that saluted Wolf's status as a smallpox survivor.

Their devotion pleased Wolf's vanity, but he was more interested in their relative lack of focus. The more extreme forms of discipline, in the early going, had been constant, thinning the ranks and forcing up the recruitment rate. Things had improved, but still! The nonsense he'd had to put up with would strain a saint. He remained standing, eyes saccading continually over the nearby brush and woods, with his prized AK in hand.

Not that there hadn't been a lot to choose from in the shop. He could have gone with one of the many models of AR; they'd even stocked that lovely HK. But he appreciated sturdy and simple and he appreciated the extra hundred yards of reach. His entire life of some twenty-four years – getting old, jee-dee it – had been one long shot anyway.

Everything else he had cached, and doled out over time, but much of it was gone or out of commission now.

Burgoyne, a feral slip of a youth who'd proved useful in culverts, sewers and "rat holes," reported in. He carried his favorite (and now rare) weapon, a Stoecker coach gun Wolf had entrusted to him, with a

bandolier of assorted shells, each lovingly encased in plastic wrap.

"Heyaa, Wolfie, all clear in back."

"Sure, it's all effing swamp anyways. Take a breather here with th' boys, I'm gonna follow up Willits for a bit."

Wolf didn't have to go far. Willits, a cautious and reliable scout, had holed up in a copse of willow and other trash trees, on the edge of an unexpected expanse of grass.

"Whatcha got here, dubyah?"

"Wide open; no cover, no housing. That mountain we've been aiming for comes down to a gap on the other side of this; and there's a bridge out there."

"Lemme get a look at that." Wolfie reached into the back pocket of his cruiser's vest, and produced a small rifle scope, which he preferred to the binoculars he'd found in the shop. He'd fitted the scope, side-mount, to his AK, and so the scope could serve dual purposes. But for moving targets he liked iron sights. Unwrapping the scope from its protective bag, he swept the horizon with it, then grunted.

"Not enough elevation; there's a lot of dead ground here. Ya done right ta hold up. Gimme a leg up into this effin' tree here."

From his perch, Wolf studied the bridge. Too clean. *It oughta have more crap growin' on it by now, even though it's all steel and asphalt around there. Hmm.*

He swept the horizon again. To the south, woods over to the base of the mountain, the slopes of which were grassy, and rocky at the top. Might go that way and get a look from up there at the valley behind; lots of exposure, though. To the north, where, he knew from the map, the freeway had swept in close to the foothills, stood one of the ubiquitous cell towers. Out of habit he scoped that.

Something about it didn't quite look right.

Wolf packed up the scope, grinning at Willits who was standing by his knees, below.

"Dubyah, call up th' boys and form column on me; we'll make for that cell tower through th' woods. Let's keep out of sight of it, though, long as we can. Savvy?"

"Savvy, Wolfie." Willits, crossbow in hand, disappeared into the short green shadows of the willow thicket.

∴

The ancient telephone in the command post rang twice.

This startled "Captain" Murchison.

The phone system, a closely guarded secret, had been assembled by Murchison and a couple of technically teachable youngsters from gear they had found in what might well have been a ham radio museum. Powered by a twelve-volt solar panel salvaged from a roadside

signboard, and a rotated set of of deep-cycle RV batteries, each of four stations held a doorbell button, a doorbell, and a dynamic handset with magnetically-driven microphone and speaker. The range of operation, assuming enough suitable wire could be found, probably was no more than ten miles.

A weakness of the system was that all four posts could listen in on any conversation, like a party line; another was that anyone sufficiently trained and equipped, and patient enough to sort out the wires, could theoretically patch in, using a sufficiently old-fashioned headset and a pair of alligator clips. But the wires had been buried; Carey Murchison regarded the system as relatively secure.

It was, however, to be used only *in extremis*. This had as much to do with the state of the batteries as any security consideration. Good stuff could not be had anyway, as the farming limited one's options. Divided attention was the Creek's bugaboo.

Two rings meant Mo-reen, in the advanced lookout.

Doubleyou-tee-eff?

Carey picked up the handset and pressed the button in the handle as he held it to his ear. *Click*.

"Go ahead, over." He released the button. *Click*.

Click. "S'Mo. Over." *Click*. A whisper, heard on two mountaintops and in the command post.

Damn it all. She's keeping her voice down. Trouble!

Click. "S'up, Mo? Over." *Click*.

Click. "Position may be compromised. Over." *Click*.

Click. "Describe. Over." *Click*.

Click. "Body of at least twenty advancing on position, direct heading, no bye, all on foot, armed, rucksacks, camo. Over." *Click*.

Too far and too many to mount a rescue in time. And they might be advance echelons of a larger force; a full engagement might compromise the whole valley. If only the few horses weren't harrowing for winter wheat this week!

Click. "Got 'em, Carey." This was Ellen's voice on the Ball Butte station. "One point man, main body twenty-five, twenty-six, ahh, twenty-seven ... twenty-nine, thirty. And ... one rear. Over." *Click*.

Shit. Click. "Describe weapons, Mo. Over." *Click*.

Click. "Bows, crossbows. Umm, one rifle! with banana mag. Over-r-r." *Click*. A desperate child's voice. But disciplined. Still whispering and holding to protocol.

Click. "Confirmed, Carey. Rear has a firearm as well. They are less than one hundred yards from Mo and closing, double pace. Over." *Click*. Ellen Murchison again, steady as ever. But this information, assuming Mo's hideout had somehow been made, was a sentence of death, and all four stations knew it.

Click. "Advise; drop and run? Over." asked Murchison. *Click*.

Click. "No, sir, can't run; they're on my ladder side. May be forced to secure, drop items, engage. Love ya!"
Click.

∴

Under the canopy of a long copse of ash and willow, which followed what had once been a drainage ditch, Wolf's small army had made for the cell tower as a point of interest in a practically featureless landscape. Sometimes nice things could be turned up inside those inevitable chain-link fences.

If nothing was there, they could have a go at the small hill in the middle distance, from the summit of which, no doubt, they could see into the valley behind that bridge and decide if it was worth investing.

Wolf stopped a moment and studied the cell tower. It was one of the tube type, common enough along the freeway corridor. There would be a tool shed, a bunch of conduits coming out of the ground by the shed, leading into a junction box with a door on it, like a circuit breaker box, and, beginning about fifteen feet up the side of the tower, ladder rungs, made of steel, going up to the microwave antenna array.

It was the antenna array that had captured his attention. On it was an eagle's nest, a six-foot deep pile of branches and twigs, with lots of bird shit all over the top. More of the white stuff had streaked the tower on its lee, or southern, side, covering some of the ladder rungs, and spattered on the leaves of the Himalaya blackberries that had taken over the chain-link fence.

Wolf turned to Willits, who stood near his elbow.

"Dubya, get me Burgie. Nah, scratch, get me Cougar; he's been achin' to show off for weeks."

Willits smirked his approval; Burgoyne, like himself, was too valuable to throw away on a maybe. Cougar was reliable enough for some recon, if it didn't get too complicated, but was much more expendable. Wolf had the middle management touch. Willits saluted with a finger to his forehead. "Wolf."

"Willits." Willits departed, low and fast.

Willits found Cougar in the middle of the column, on one knee with his chin on his compound bow. "Cougar!"

"Willits."

Willits jerked his thumb. "Wolf."

Cougar left his pack, brought his bow and quiver, and ran with Willits to the lead.

"Wolf." Cougar's eager, wide face appeared through the brush. A good worker, thought Wolf. Just a hair on the whiny side, though.

"Coug, got a job."

"S'good."

"Yeah, so, what do ya see over there?"

"Uhhh, cell tower, fence, gate in them briars, padlocked. Uhh, door open, no windows."

"Padlock new or old?"

"Umm? Uhh, can't really tell from here. Too shady."

"'K, what I want ya ta do, leave your bow and shit here and run over and look at that padlock And see if y'c'n look inside that shed. Then grab me a leaf – one 'a the ones wi' birdshit on it – and bring it back here."

Cougar looked like he'd like to question the bit about the leaf, but he remembered his protocol in time and dropped the bow and quiver. "S'good."

"Gotcha covered. Go!" Wolf pulled the bolt on his AK and sighted vaguely on the eagle's nest.

Cougar zig-zagged through the Scotch broom in what had been a small parking lot, stood up by the gate, snatched a leaf, and brought it back.

"S'good, Coug, what'd ya see?"

"Old padlock, rusty. Nothin' in th' shed."

"Hmm. 'K, arm and fall back."

"S'good, Wolf."

Wolf set down his AK and sniffed the leaf as Willits watched. Then he reached into his vest pocket and peeled the plastic wrap from a much-beloved disposable lighter. He flicked on the flame, scorched the white-spattered leaf, and sniffed again.

"Sonnabitch."

"S'at, Wolfie?" asked Willets.

"This here's *paint*. Wonder how they're gettin' in and out?"

"Ladders, maybe? Throw one in, throw it out?"

"Yeah, team effort. Willits –" Wolf pointed up to the eagle's nest "– that there is a *lookout*. An' it won't do no good as a lookout 'nless they c'n talk to each other. Occupied? Maybe. I'm declarin' a high-value-objective. Get me Burgie. I want his shotgun, too, 'n the magnum slugs; seven-six-two might not have enough penetration."

∴

Mo-reen had stripped off her shirt, wrapped the precious handset in it, and dropped it through the toilet seat, down the long shaft of the tower into the noisome glop below.

She lay back on her sleeping bag, took up her crossbow, set it against the wall, put her foot into the stirrup, cranked the string back to the notch, and rolled up to a crouch over the trapdoor, on one knee. There was no room to stand up in the "eagle's nest."

Through the loophole in the trapdoor, she could see that a small

man had already popped the padlock with a huge bolt cutter, wrenched open the gate, and run to the base of the tower with a



grappling hook. He got the bottom rung on the first try, and began swarming up a knotted rope. She could see a hatchet and a handgun, tucked in his sash.

Mo-reen leaned back and picked up a bolt from her stash. She'd made them herself, from hammered coins for heads, turned cedar shafts, and chicken-feather fletching. Grandpa had been so proud.

There was a startling explosion, and the two-inches-thick hatch leaped in its bar and hinges. A hole appeared in the hatch, and splinters of wood embedded themselves in Mo-reen's arm. The pain, combined with her primal fear, made loading the bolt a chore. Her breath rasped and her hands shook uncontrollably. She'd have to position herself over the loophole again; that might still be concealment, but it was clearly not cover. She felt naked to all the world.

Leaning over the loophole, she found the climber already twenty feet away and ascending rapidly. His feet, as they slapped the rungs, made echoes in the tube tower. She set the stirrup of her weapon against the loophole, locked the stock into her shoulder, and aimed.

Another hole, with an ear-splitting impact, appeared in the hatch. Half-dazed, Mo-reen was aware she'd been shot in the hip area with something heavy, as well as more splinters. Staying put, she checked her aim again.

The man below was right beneath her. He had one hand on the top rung and with the other was reaching for the pistol. Her blood was already running across the floor and dripping onto his helmet. Armor! Professionals at last – but no way to tell the Creek.

Mo-reen waited till he looked up, and loosed the bolt. In slow motion, he began a fall of more than a hundred feet, with her fletching of chicken feathers protruding from his throat, just above the top of the zipper on his Kevlar vest. *One for the Marines!*

She checked her hip, where the numbness was spreading. Not good. Not good at all. *Shit.*

My life. Could have been kind of a nice one. S'over. Thank-you-Jeeah-for-all-that-was-good.

She reached for another bolt, but things were already shading into a red dream. And how would she crank the bow, anyway? She wasn't even sure she had legs.

Nothing for it; must pop now while she still could. *Maybe something will fall on somebody and ruin his day. That would be nice.* She opened the box on the wall beside her as another slug and yet another came through the trapdoor to her left, showering her with splinters. *Red to red, black to black.* She'd already connected black. Holding one red wire in her shaking right hand and the other in her left, she stroked the stripped ends across each other, and had the momentary satisfaction, in the darkness of her cramped and final abode, of seeing a tiny spark.

...

In the command post beneath the Starvation Creek Mess Hall, Captain Carey Murchison was watching the voltmeter on the wall of the battery station. The needle flickered, dipped, and rose back to thirteen volts. A slight tremor reached his feet through the packed earth floor.

He turned away. Soon there would be a column of black smoke, miles away to the west, beyond the reach of the little valley. A runner, a boy of about ten, stood by his side.

"I'm sorry, sir."

"Yes. But she was a volunteer. We can't play favorites, as you know."

"Yes, sir."

"Go and call a General Meeting. Entire length of the Road, everyone not exempt or needed to cover the approaches. Condition red."

"Right away, sir." The runner turned on his heel and ran.

Murchison sat down heavily and put his head in his hands. People would begin arriving from the nearest farms in ten minutes. He must do his mourning between now and then, and *not* give in to the darkness. That much, and no more, he could do for his only granddaughter.

∴

Karen tried to wipe the sweat from her eyes, but that seemed to make matters worse. So she stepped to her water bottle, sloshed some water on each eyelid, and felt better. A little more water on top of her head, and tipped onto each shoulder of her new tunic, and she felt better still. She returned to the sawbuck and gripped her end of the bucksaw.

Tomma smiled across to her, and they resumed their rhythmic dance, pulling the saw through a green Douglas fir log toward each other. Errol had discovered they made a good team on tasks of this kind, and assigned them to add to the woodpile whenever they were both available. Karen had spent much of the two previous winters getting in wood, but much of it was done with a sledge and pry bar, tearing down sheds and splintering one-by-fours into usable fodder for the stoves, and it had burned dishearteningly fast. The bucksaw was new to her, but she took to it.

The trick with the saw was never to bear down, never to hurry. They had found each other's pace; they could do this for hours. But sweat built up; no one could deny it was work.

"One more row across the top of the pile, then a real break, 'K?'" asked Tomma.

"Do we really use this much wood?" Most rooms on the farm were unheated. As winter approached, everyone gravitated to the big kitchens in the evenings.

"Thirty cords in a winter; no!" he laughed. "Ten, maybe, with the kitchen, the wood shop, and two of the cabins to feed. But not everyone on the Creek has time to get wood in. And we need to push back the trees a ways."

She nodded. Improving security must be combined, whenever possible, with farm work. Clearing land was an efficient use of their time, and she'd helped with that as well, on the Jones and Beemans allotments. Some of the logs had been brought to Ames', and were waiting to be bucked at the sawbuck. None of the logs were very large; the woods to the north were all second and third growth, much of it having sprung up in former pastures.

There had been a sawmill on the Creek back in the last century; but it had run on electricity; lots of it; such power was not to be found at present. As smaller businesses had become uneconomical to operate in the face of competition from corporate giants, the mill had failed, let go its workers, and been stripped of its machinery. Lumber sold in the area after that had come from Canada. When Karen was told the story, it sounded familiar enough; her father had talked about the fallacy of "economies of scale." *Goods produced that way were cheaper*, he'd said. *But with so many unemployed, who could buy?*

The mill building was now the Mess Hall. Creekers used it to hold civil and social meetings, and to feed those who had not yet a place on any of the farms. Its kitchen was the largest, and facilities were springing up round it for blacksmithing, smoking meat and fish, tanning hides, and the like. But as much as possible was done on the farms, on the principle of distributed capability.

Cutting wood, for example. Sweat was about to run into Karen's eyes again. She looked across at Tomma, but saw that his attention was turned to the main house, down the slope from the woodpiles. She followed his gaze.

A small boy, whom they both recognized as one of the "runners" whose function was to carry prioritized communications along the Creek, was talking with Juanita, and he was holding the reins of the Creek's one Icelandic pony, which was reserved for the young runners. As they conferred, Mrs. Ames appeared in the kitchen door, and was listening intently. Presently the boy mounted, bareback, and rode off at a measured trot. Mrs. Ames stepped over to the iron pipe "bell" and began clapping it vigorously with the kindling hatchet.

Tomma dropped his end of the saw and stood up; Karen did likewise. Then Tomma picked up the saw, and carrying it in his hand, ran on his long legs down to the farmhouse, with Karen in pursuit. Mrs. Ames stood with arms akimbo, while Juanita stepped forward to meet them.

"Tomma, I will take the saw. It is a General and it is a Condition Red, so everyone that can be spared should go, and go armed and

provisioned. I see that Errol is coming down, and my husband. Mrs. Ames and I, we will prepare some food. Carry some also for others. The boys will do watch and watch, and when Vernie comes back from the saddle, I send him him after you."

Tomma turned to Karen. "It's short notice, but ... are you in?"

Two months ago she might well have remained noncommittal, a stance her father had recommended she keep to as long as possible in all circumstances. But as her sweat mingled with that of the others, as she burned her fingers on the ironstone bread pans and Juanita treated them, as she watched green things grow and become food for her body and theirs, she had come to think a home among others would be a good thing. Food and a people, she saw, could be fought for, like her own blood and life for which she had fought more than once.

"I believe I should go with you."

"Fair answer. You'll want all the gear in your corner; meet ya here."

:::

"Her corner" was not in the upstairs room she'd occupied on arrival. Weeks ago she'd moved into one of the cabins. These were made of logs, twelve feet square, with a heavy door and doorbar and no windows, only loopholes. Even the roofs were made of logs, with rare and valuable steel roofing laid over. The cabin covered two sides of the farmhouse from loopholes, and was connected to it by a buried culvert which could be blocked at either end. There were two sets of bunk beds in the cabin, but Karen was the only occupant as yet.

It was good, said Mrs. Ames, that the building should be lived in, to prevent mold and such. Karen liked that its door could be barred, that it was difficult to burn, held a supply of food and water, and had an emergency exit, and she appreciated that she had been let in on the secret of these little forts and had one of them entrusted to her. It was of course very dark with its door closed, but in the cheery fall weather she kept the door open as often as she could, and sat, in her little free time, in the entrance, making and mending such things as needed attention.

Karen now had two sets of "gear" – her original backpack with its fiberglass bow and arrows, re-provisioned, hung on the wall by her bed. Her new "campaign kit" such as everyone else had, stood in the corner. A bedroll, a jerkin, leggings, strong sandals made from old tires, a new and much more powerful bow as tall as she, which Errol had made of Pacific yew, and arrows of cedar, with broadheads made from large steel washers cut in half, re-shaped and sharpened. They were not as accurate as her carbon fiber arrows, but serviceable, and there were twenty, in their own quiver.

She went to her backpack and collected some items unique to herself: her old belt, with its Schrade skinner knife, and a pouch containing, among other things, her monocular, trash-bag "raincoat," and flint-and-steel. Creekers had adopted a style of long, floppy leather or cloth belt that they slipped through two steel rings and then tucked under with a kind of slip knot. She found it awkward, and preferred her old-style belt with buckle and punched holes. She was in and out of the dark room, closing the door behind her, in ninety seconds.

In the back yard of the house, Tomma, Errol, and Mr. Molinero were shipping hefty pack frames brought to the door by Mrs. Ames and Mrs. Molinero. Another, only slightly smaller, was brought for Karen, who sat down, tied her bedroll around the top and sides with vintage clothesline, shrugged into the wool-rope straps, and was given a hand up by Errol. Each dipped a steel, plastic, or aluminum cup in a water bucket on the table by the door, drank it off, and turned to go. Juanita planted a quick kiss on her husband's cheek – anything more demonstrative was held unseemly along the Creek – and Karen barely caught her whisper: "Jeeah go with you."

Mr. Molinero, as the oldest, wore a long thin whistle on a thong round his neck. He led out, with Tomma close behind him. The Creek Road beckoned, dappled with early afternoon sunlight through autumn leaves under a mackerel sky – change in the weather coming.

Tomma carried, along with his bedroll and pack frame and bag, his irreplaceable replica Hawken rifle and a leather pouch on a shoulder strap. The others had bows, like Karen's, all made by Errol the carpenter. Errol also had with him a few basic tools, including a cruiser's axe with a smooth ash handle, tucked into the webbing of his pack sack. All wore stout leather jerkins on the same pattern as that worn by Karen.

As they walked together, they came upon four members of the Wilson household from across the Creek, in getup similar to their own, but with broad-brimmed leather hats. They all carried Errol-made crossbows. The tallest, a man of perhaps twenty in a close-cropped black beard, stepped over to Emilio and shook hands.

"Emilio, Tomma, everyone, good seeing."

"Good, Allyn. You know Karen?" Tomma gestured toward her.

"We've met already." Smiling, but suddenly shy, Allyn stood with his hands by his sides.

Karen ended the awkward pause, "Tomma, while you were away I was at Wilson's with David and Raul, drying apples."

Allyn smiled. "Speaking of which, we have some to share, I think." He turned to the others. "Stannin?"

"Oh, yeah." Stannin, a round-faced youth of some thirteen winters came forward with a white canvas bag marked "PNLA Portland

2014." An antique, still serviceable. It was filled with dehydrated apple slices. Karen, along with the other Ames farmers, took a handful, and absently read out the advertising as she did so.

"You can read?" Stannin asked, wonderingly.

"Mmm, these are nice. Yes." Karen had been slow to discover that literacy was disappearing as the second-generation Creekers reached adulthood. There was little to read, so she was out of practice herself; and the educational goals, for now, of Starvation Creek leaned toward agriculture, manual trades, first aid, and marksmanship. An apprenticeship program was said to be in the works, but, so far, it seemed to her everything was still catch-as-catch-can. Karen had herself been put to learning the baking of barley cakes and oat cakes, many of which, rolled in broad leaves, were in her pack frame at the moment.

"Let us move our feet," said Emilio. "I see the Jones and the Holyroods go ahead of us, and they are opening a wide lead."

:::

Everyone fell into double columns on the narrow road. Once paved, dirt had accreted on most of it, and grown grass and weeds, and it had become a cart track, with a green ribbon down the middle. A few drops of rain fell.

Allyn fell in beside Karen. "Have you been baking ever since you came over?"

"Mmph –" Karen pointed to her mouth, chewed, and swallowed. "–no; we've been cutting wood and working on the little blockhouses. I just moved into one."

"I'm *still* cutting and drying apple slices; even though there's not really enough sun now. We need to clear out the cold frames and start winter veggies."

"Maybe you could smoke the apples."

"Very funny." He pointed to Karen's bow. "Get any practice in with that?"

"Some; not enough. It's very nice, lots of power. But though I have been oiling it, every few days the point of aim changes."

"How much?"

"About twelve centimeters left to twenty meters – if there's no wind."

"Twelve in ... I think *I* need more practice than *you* do. You're good."

Karen, striding long to keep up with Emilio and Tomma, turned her head and regarded Allyn's earnest expression. "I had a good teacher. But ... thank you."

Allyn seemed almost about to stumble. Several expressions chased

themselves round his face, then he looked ahead, matching stride with her.

This sort of thing – a promising conversation that halted suddenly – had happened between them before. Karen was not sure what to make of it.

They caught up to the Beemans the Lazars and the Ellins crews. Along with the Joneses and the Holyroods, the number had swelled to some twenty-four young men, and three women. All mingled briefly, then fell in and marched on past Reymers Farm, which lay on the other side of the creek. Two women, gathering potatoes, waved and then stooped to their work. Their warriors had already left for the Mess Hall. Behind their fields, clouds began to shroud the long basaltic spine of Starvation Ridge, and the day darkened.

"Hi. We met yet?" The two young women had somehow edged Allyn away, and were walking on either side of Karen. They carried laminated compound bows, a new thing in Karen's eyes. They were both shorter and wider than she, the one on the left fair-skinned, red-haired and freckled – much more so than Karen, and the one on the right was olive-skinned, dark eyed, and smiling – it was she who had spoken.

"Karen. Ames."

"Heard of you; I'm Aleesha and this's Marcee. We're both Lazar's."

"So," asked Marcee, "You a warrior? Not all the women are."

Karen wasn't sure what to answer to that, but Marcee went on. "The old-timers are all about how women have the eggs, of which there aren't going to be enough, so we're supposed to stay out of any fighting – unless it comes to the farms."

A picture leaped into Karen's mind of Juanita's bow and arrows, leaning on the wall in the Ames kitchen. Readiness, at least, had no gender.

"So, you've ever been in battle? You're too new here, I'd think." Marcee seemed to be looking Karen over appraisingly.

"No, I have not been in these 'battles.'"

"Aha! A raw recruit."

Tomma, now several ranks forward, looked back. "Don't be too sure. She's a Drownproofer."

"A what?" Marcee looked confused.

"Drownproofer. She was trained all her life to avoid attackers, then whip them when cornered."

Allyn chimed in. "And she has."

A steady light rain began to fall as evening came. The young people, many of whom had little in the way of rain gear, were happy to arrive at the Mess Hall no later than they did; they shucked their heavy pack frames and went to empty places at the tables, where baked potatoes and steamed kale awaited them in a variety of wooden

or ceramic bowls. Pitchers of water and old Tupperware or aluminum tumblers were also available. But as for cutlery, each was left to his or her own devices. The potatoes had cooled. Karen set to with her belt knife and looked around her as she ate.

The long room was packed with people. Against the wall in the middle was a low plywood stage with a table and chairs on it; and in all but one of the chairs sat, presumably, Elders. Karen knew three of them: Tom and Elsa Chaney, the doctor and the farmer at Chaney's; on the table, hands splayed to his left and right, sat the "Captain," Carey Murchison, the former Marine sergeant. His balding head bowed, he seemed to her frailer than when they'd met, but still powerful.

Murchison raised his head and said something to Tom Chaney, who stood up. The spate of conversations and clatter of dishes subsided.

"Hi, and welcome to the General Meeting. It's not like ones we're used to. It's a two-parter; and there's nothing to vote on." His smile eased some of the tense atmosphere. "The Bledsoes, Josephs and Russells have already met and they've gone up to reinforce the Murchisons on Ball Butte. There's a bit of a war on." His kind eyes fell on Murchison. "Carey."

"Thanks, Tom." He looked round the room; some fifty young faces – *so young!* – looked back. "Today, a party of, we think, thirty-one, all male, surprised the Eagles's Nest from the woods and the lookout was forced to pull the plug. We believe the attackers also suffered a ... fatality. They appear to have spent part of the afternoon sifting through the wreckage of the Nest, and at least some are now making for the Butte, and should arrive under cover of darkness."

He gestured toward a handmade map, with east at the top, hanging from the wall behind the table. "As you can see, as they've split their forces, they may believe they can hold our attention on the Butte and slip into the valley just north of the Bridge. There might not be too many of them, but they have discipline, some courage, and enterprising leadership, and they may be *hungry*. Also –" he looked round the room again for emphasis – "they possess two or more firearms and some ammunition." He let this sink in.

There were no questions; another sign that this was not your garden variety General when everyone seemed to have something to say into the wee hours. Many could guess who'd died at the Eagle's Nest, and the shock cleared their heads. Soon all would know, and mourn with the "old man." For now, they could honor the loss best by giving him their full attention.

"We have very little time. Wendler's?"

"Three." a voice came from the far back.

"Tomlinsons'."

"Four." Karen knew that voice. Cal Perkins, the smiling man she'd met on the road with Mrs. Ames. So they had settled at Tomlinsons'.

"Schneider's?"

"Three."

"Gulick's?"

"Two." Gulick Farm had few residents again; something Dr. Chaney called "flu depletion."

Flu was a serious matter on the Creek, and had disrupted more harvests, and canceled more trainings, than any other factor. There were no graves, however; bodies were ceremonially composted, along with all other farm "waste." The dead, it had been noted, had registered no complaints.

"Okay, so, twelve. Go form a line between Russells' crew and the flat."

And so on; Hisey's and Delsman's crews would form a line across the creek, with their center on the Bridge; Maggie's and Peacher's would return home and then fan out north across the saddle between Ball Butte and Maggie's Hill; Reymer's, Lazar's and Ellins' crews would throw a line from the Bridge to the Chaney farm, to back up those on Ball Butte but also be available to throw into the line across the Bridge; and Beemans, Jones', Holyrood's, Wilson's and Ames' would stay at the Mess Hall, a last reserve.

Murchison gave them all the passwords for the night, and offered a few general instructions; keep at least twenty feet but no more than forty feet apart, keep still, keep quiet, engage anyone who fails a challenge; come to one another's rescue as needed, but use common sense; if you find yourself hurt or weaponless and alone, fall back on Hall.

Each "crew" had its own tactical leader, carrying a shrill wooden whistle. The whistle was intended to be unique in note, a call to one's own; but in practice anyone might respond. Assuming there were no deep sleepers. It would be four hours on, four hours off for the next while. More or less; who had a working watch anymore?

This was no more than a skirmish line; if that war party out there had stuck together they could cut through any part of it like butter. But it would be the Creekers' best chance of determining their movements until morning.

Sixty-three fighters were available in all, including those from Murchison's farm; those had been on alert at the Ball Butte station all day, though, and would need relief. And, of course, the Ridge, which had its own crew. So, say fifty-nine mobile, a third of them half-trained and experienced, the other two thirds half-trained and green.

So, we can expect a casualty rate of two to one. Or more. In that sense they have us outnumbered. Were the odds better at this end of the valley, he would have sent back the Ames' and the Wilsons's crews to watch the eastern saddles on Maggie's Hill and the Ridge. *But you can only cover so many bets at a time.* Not for the last time that day,

Murchison struggled to keep his mind away from the futile round of "what ifs" concerning the failed lookout; none of it would bring back his granddaughter.

The crews moved back to their gear along the walls, taking their weapons, blanket rolls, and such rain capes or wool cloaks as they had, but leaving behind the pack frames. These had been used to bring in food supplies for the campaign. A few workers, whose farm was known as Hall, wearing aprons and cloth caps, began opening packs as the last "soldiers" filed out.

"Tomma, please take your firearm and go out to the trees and cover the entrance." Murchison smiled wanly. "And keep your powder dry." "Rest of you, half of you go take a nap, half please assist with the food. We'll make a third of it available for meals here over the next few days, and the usual two thirds will go into the ox-cart queue."

Karen made eye contact with Emilio, whose gentle smile showed her the chain of command was as it should be. She checked the location of her blanket roll, bow, and quiver, and presented herself to the nearest "Hall." "Hi."

The boy, surely about twelve, had a long, thin face, scraggly black hair, a light complexion, and dark eyes that seemed to look narrowly at her from beneath his eyelids. "I'm Guchi. Hall."

"Karen ... umm, Ames."

"S'short for Yamaguchi. I dunno, it was on a tag I had around my neck when they found me."

"Sounds a good name either way. What do I do?"

Allyn appeared by her right shoulder.

"What do *we* do?"

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Wolf the Lucky wondered, not for the first time, about luck. He'd lost his best man and four twelve-gauge slugs and had not much to show for it. And now it looked like rain.

Rain, as everyone knew, was poisonous.

"Willits."

"Wolf."

"So what all we got here?"

Willits handed him the precious Glock. "No harm done to that, as usual." He looked over his shoulder at the wreckage which was being systematically gone over by Wolf's men. "The fire at the top of the tower looks like it will go on for awhile – there may have been volatiles stored inside. Most of what came down is just wood – roundwood woven together to make the 'nest.' There was one occupant; looks like it was a girl. She was blown all over us along with some of her personal items, a crossbow and a pair of binoculars which are a total loss, and a few handmade bolts, which we can use.

Oh, and we know you hit her; low in the gut. That might be why she ..."

"Burgoyne?" Wolf cut in.

"He's salvageable. A lot of stuff came down right on him and the fire didn't get to him. Got the Kevlar, got the axe, got the bolt cutters. Cougar is divvying up the meat with the axe."

"Come across wires, caps, fuses?" *Communication gear?*

"Uhh, no. If she had anything like that it must have gone down the tower."

"Any sign of what the girl's been eating?"

"Umm, beets, apples, potatoes, and some kind of bread. Anything else, blown away."

They always left the best for last, instead of coming out with it. Even Willits. *It's enough to drive ya mad*. Apples could be foraged ... but ...

"Beets? Potatoes. Bread!" *Eff! It's the pot of gold*.

These farmers must be amateur fighters, or they'd never have let her get out this far with farmed food. It was like a signpost: *come and get us*. On the other hand, the blast had been a pretty slick trick. No smell of cordite or whatever. What else have they got? Have to be careful, but not too careful. Speed might be of the essence. Those clouds up there; around here, when it rained, they sat right on the hills, blanking out any advantage of a pair of eyes on the heights. He made up his mind and handed the shotgun and four buckshot shells to his new second-in-command.

"Willits, let's wrap up here."

"Wolf."

"Take five guys and this and go recon that hilltop due east of us; I have a feeling we're being watched from there. Travel light, take water, run a hundred, walk a hundred. The rest of us will take the meat and your loads, get back into the cover and work our way over toward that bridge. If you can, clear out the hilltop and get a look-see into the valley. Either way, come back down and rejoin us by the bridge. Chirp, we'll chirp twice and bring ya into the lines."

"S'good, Wolfie."

"Willits." They each touched a finger to their foreheads.

Wolf holstered the Glock, turned to the remainder of his crew, who had gathered, sensing decision, and gestured with his AK.

"You got all that?"

"Wolf," they replied, almost in unison for once. They gathered up the recon's, and Burgoyne's, gear, as well as the fresh meat, and fell into column with Cougar on point. The Scotch broom, scenting the air with their passage, added its pungency to the smell of burnt wood and flesh. Smoke rose behind them, and they stepped in the shadows of tall ash and cottonwood.

What's keeping them? Ellen Murchison wondered for the fortieth time. Her crew was worn out, not only from an unusually long day with short rations, but the tension of knowing that an armed force, led by a man carrying the weapon that had fired on her granddaughter's position, might come upon them from somewhere to the west. Or, anyway, she'd seen them toiling toward her, before they entered the dead ground below the slope. Since then clouds had rolled in, chill and bleak. Now it was nightfall. *Not much advantage to attack us here now*, she thought. *Unless they mean to stay*.

She'd already packed up her phone and buried the wires. A last call might be vital to the Butte crew, but if made too late, would compromise the remaining two stations' communications. One must know when one is expendable and act accordingly.

Wait; footsteps? She hauled back the long spur of her replica Colt Navy percussion revolver. It went through its litany of little clicks; disturbingly loud in the stone shelter. Black powder had been easier to revive than modern ammunition; but if the weather was going into its winter mode, the weapon could become unreliable. Still, she'd done what she could. With Jeeah's blessing, she could theoretically take out five.

"Clearcut." A voice in the fog, that of Melvin, one of her outliers. A bowman.

"Blowdown." Ah, the right answer. She'd wait a few moments before easing down the hammer, though.

"Come forward and let's see you. Crew?" asked Melvin. Good; almost a whisper, as directed.

"Russell's. Got Bledsoe's and Joseph's, so we're nine. Action?" *Too loud. Well, one thing at a time.*

"We'll show you outlying positions and go; three fit into the post."

A body attached to the "Russell's" voice arrived outside the dugout; a young man looked in. "Beg pardon, ma'am —" he lowered his voice as he became aware she was shushing him — "Ol' Man says we have to string off to the left and connect up with a line forming up; all the way down to the creek."

"All right. Thank you for coming. What do you carry?"

"Me? Bow, and one of the new 'swords.'"

Ellen began dismantling the tripod of the telescope. "Tell you what; I'll have my arms full getting this down from here tonight. Give me that little sword in case I have to defend it, and you take the Navy. You know how to use it, right?"

"*Jeeah*. Yes; I've dry fired it, anyway. Long time since I've seen it."

"K, well, when ready, hammer all the way back; if seven paces or less, point, shoot. There's no safety or anything like that to worry

about. And as it's heavy you won't have too much recoil. But you might want to stuff some moss in your ears; it's close in here." Another face appeared in the doorway. "Your friend here should watch your back and be your ears –!"

A gleaming tube, barely visible in this light, pointed in through the doorway. There was a blinding flash as a weapon was fired, point-blank, into the young man from Russell's, who spun and fell soundlessly against her. Blinded and deafened, Ellen forced herself to feel for the dropped revolver – it seemed to take forever as the collapsed body, still quivering, interfered. Why hadn't she been shot yet? Oh – he must be blinded himself.

She grasped the comforting grips of the long, heavy Navy. She must have made some sound, as there was movement from the presumed direction of the doorway. To shoot, she'd have to give him her position with the noise of her revolver's hammer; advantage bandit.

No happy endings in real life. One of Carey's favorite sayings.

Footsteps outside; more of them? The figure in the entrance twisted, but this provided her with no opening; the tube – it had clearly been a shotgun's blast – was still aimed her way. Then there came a welcome thump; quite loudly, her assailant had been struck in the back of the head. He'd be tightening his trigger finger as consciousness slid away

Ellen gathered strength to shove the body aside and leap to her left, as the second explosion came. She gasped involuntarily as pain seared her right side. But she hoped – based on old experience as a United States Marine – that she'd got off light. Most of the pellets had disappeared into the poor young man she'd known for all of thirty seconds. Whatever had passed through hurt, but was not debilitating. Or so she told herself.

"Mrs. M.?" shouted a tremulous voice, much too loud, in the entryway, as the shotgunner sagged and fell into the interior.

"Come in. And you are?" She holstered the Navy, picked up the shotgun, leaned it on the wall, and searched the body for ammunition. There was a pocket. *Two shells! Buckshot, betcha.*

"I'm Huskey, Bledsoe's. We're in a row out here." He stood, breathing heavily, in the entrance, a hatchet in one hand.

Ellen could hear shouting and blows: hand-to-hand. She scrambled in her pack. "Here. I'm going out with this –" she picked up the shotgun, snapped it open, shoved in two shells. "– a little ways off. Cut his throat, just in case, then count to ten –" she handed him her only flare. "– smash it down on the wall here, like *this*. *Hard*, 'k? Don't look right at it, but hold this end, and run out and throw it as high as you can. On *ten*. Got me?"

She could feel him grinning in the dark. "Yes, *ma'am*!"

Jeeah, she thought. *A few more like this one, pretty please.* She stepped out and limped to the nearest boulders. If anybody was there, they had *better* know the effing password.

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Guchi showed Karen and Allyn the kitchen arrangements. Three wood cook stoves of varying manufacture were arrayed against one wall, with steel pipes that had been let into a wide brick chimney. Pots and pans of all sizes and differing in style and quality hung from hooks or nails driven into a plank that ran the width of the ceiling.

A variety of sinks stood along the opposite wall, with buckets underneath to catch gray water for use on the farm. A large hand pump adapted from an old windmill pump stood in a cement basin on the floor, but was, apparently, seldom used, there being water pressure to the sinks from impounded springs at the base of Starvation Ridge. Steps led down beside the sinks through a hole in the floor, with railings around it; Karen supposed, knowing by now how Creekers did things, that this led to a pantry and buttery.

The stoves were all going, and on their flat iron surfaces steamed pots of stew. Guchi waved at these. "Carrots, cabbage, kale, walking onions, elephant garlic, sunchoke, cilantro. My own recipe, hah ha. But we have no salt. We are using blood from chickens. It would be better with salt. We do have some dried and ground chile peppers, though. I will be stirring these and keeping the fires."

He gestured to the long butcher block table down the middle of the room. It had a magnetic strip loaded with old, lovingly sharpened and stropped knives, anywhere from three to twelve inches long, along with a couple of cleavers. There were real oil lamps going; a luxury.

"Sorry there is not better light. Choose your weapons! – there are pack bags of potatoes and bulb onions here; we don't have enough fat on hand to fry anything, so, what to do, cut them up about so small –" he held up a two-centimeter cube of yellow-fleshed potato -- "fill these thirty-quart pots to here – cover with water – chop these chives, with some rosemary and marjoram, fine, and add them, and we will boil this down into a nice potato soup, add cream at the last moment, and the wet and hungry will love you for it," he smiled.

A head appeared in the doorway. "May I help?" Vernie! Welcome anywhere, Vernie was everyone's favorite "scullery maid," capable of putting in long hours at farm, house or kitchen work without boredom or complaint.

"So, did you see Tomma?" asked Allyn, reaching for a long knife and a red potato.

"See him – hah! He saw *me*. And challenged me! I did not yet have the password; had to lie down until someone got a lamp. My own

main man – he might have shot me. I am depressed."

This was delivered as Vernie's deadpan version of humor, and lightened the tension in the air, briefly. But as they worked, they could hear urgent comings and goings in the Mess Hall. There had been, apparently, a real fight, somewhere in the rain and darkness beyond.

⋮

Wolf stood in the rain in a black-trash-bag poncho, water dripping from his nose and eyebrows, listening. Two booms, close together, then, a bit later, a glimmer of red in the clouds, then a series of smaller bangs, spaced apart. Not good.

He turned to the men not out on picket, who were huddled around several small campfires within what might have been a house foundation. They were playing their favorite game, which was dice, by rattling the 'bones' in a tumbler and shooting them onto the cement wall.

"K, here's what I think went down. I, Wolf the Lucky, have not had a lucky day." Someone hooted. "Well, y'know, even a lucky gambler throws snake eyes now and then." More hoots, but good-natured, considering the circumstances. "Willets took longer to get up that hill than I thought; he was supposed to hit a lookout in daylight. From the sound of it, he's bit into a fort and they bit back. Somebody is double-tappin' up there and I'm thinkin' they ain't ours."

The dice-can stopped rattling. Handfuls of roast meat were suspended in mid-air. Everyone considered the implications. They were not used to things not going their way.

"So we didn't get a look-see and we're out some guys and a damn good shotgun." Wolf took off the bandolier underneath his poncho, wrapped it carefully in polyethylene sheeting, and handed it to the nearest man. "Put that away till we can get it better stashed; shotguns are a dime a dozen but ammo is effin' hard to come by."

He crossed his arms; the trash bag rustled. "Now. As you can see, we're not to th' bridge yet by half a hike ourselves; things are farther apart out here than they look. Anybody can tell me th' last time we saw a house or a barn, or anything besides that cell tower?"

The Luckies looked puzzled, and searched one another's faces and their memories. Briggs, a bowman at the middle fire, spoke up. "Well, after we got into them pilgrims, we holed up wi' th' females at that long building at th' end of a road." He grinned.

"Yep, what they used to call a 'school building.' Kids went there ta learn stuff, back in th' day. So. Nothin' since. Two days' hike, no buildings, only foundations, like this'n."

They could make nothing of that, so they awaited Wolf's conclusion.

He waved in the general direction of Ball Butte and the Creek. "Them farmers has been here awhile, and they're *organized*. I'm thinkin' they've ransacked this whole section out here –" his arm swept in an arc in the firelight "--every board, nail, and tile, not just to use, but so's nobody can use any of it ta get near 'em. No shelter, no food, no gear. None of that, so's no Pilgrims to live off of.

"I'm thinkin' th' lookouts have got word to th' home folks and th' home folks is waitin' by th' bridge ta have a go at us. With who knows what all – mines, maybe. Th' front door is shut. So, boys –" he paused for effect "--we're goin' round to th' *back* door."

"Yeah, Wolf!" assorted voices cried. "Back door! Back door! Them farmers is *meat*."

"K, so party on, then get some sleep. If nobody's back down here by daylight, we're off."

...

"Huskey, what have we got here?" Ellen had sent the young man to get a situation report. She'd covered the dugout with the shotgun, which she'd prudently not used – when might she see working shells again? – and, as Huskey's flare briefly lit the scene, was able to dispatch two bandits using her Colt Navy. Three more were already dying nearby, and she'd gone to finish them with her remaining three rounds. All of them had worked, despite the weather. People had stood around, winded and stupid from their brief, intense encounters, and she'd sent them back into line.

"Ma'am, we have six intruders, all confirmed dead. No others appear to be in the line or in front of it. If any got through and kept going, we don't know about it."

"How about our people?"

"Oh, ma'am –" he had to stop for a moment, to keep his voice from breaking – "we've lost seven – four with throats cut, one shot with a firearm, and two with arrows. And five are hurt; one with an arrow, four stabbed, one run into a rock in the dark and we're thinking broken arm. And two missing."

"That's six wounded, Huskey; the gunner got me too." She heard his sharp intake of breath. "But not badly; I'm sure I'm walking wounded." *Eff!* "So ... fifteen casualties out of *fifteen* people?"

"Ahh, no, nineteen. Tomlinsons came to our whistle. One of the hurt is theirs, but she's game to stay in line. They're on our left."

"Call it thirteen, then; eleven if our missing turn up. As against six men that we knew were coming and *thought* we were ready for. We're in trouble, Huskey, but we've been in trouble before." She looked around in the rain, but there was zilch to see. Moaning came from away to the right.

"K', pull all of the dead, ours and theirs, off the summit a ways –

say twenty feet – and we'll see about getting them down from here in the morning. Send me anybody that needs real medical attention and can walk, and we'll go down to Chaney's together and send you some stretcher bearers for the rest. Put 'em in the dugout, make 'em as comfy as you can. Are you the whistle for Bledsoes?"

"I am now." She could hear the mourning in his voice.

"Take this." She handed him the Stoege. "It'll give you two shots. Hopefully. Unload it, dry-snap it, load it, get a feel for it. *Don't* think the pellets will spray all over. It has to be aimed, just like your bow, 'K? I'm going to leave you the 'scope, too. Now ... could you find me a little sword; it's in the dugout. I didn't know that young man by name –"

"Will Stafford, ma'am. A Russell. I'll get it for you." He departed and returned, double time, and handed it to her in silence.

"Thank you, Huskey; you're a winner. I'll sit here and wait for your other walkers."

"Ma'am." Huskey turned on his heel and disappeared into the rain.

Ellen, one of the oldest residents of the Creek, suddenly realized how exhausted she was. She was soaked in fog and blood and worse, with a dour odor of burnt gunpowder clinging to her wet hair; her side was starting to bother her more than she liked. She'd also heard a bit of croup creeping into her voice as she'd talked.

It would be hours, the getting down from here with hurt people – darkness, slick spots in the trail – but some hurts must be attended quickly for best results, and she and they would just be in the way up here. She'd have to have a talk with that young woman from Tomlinson's; brave is not always wise.

A little light was filtering through the clouds now – quarter moon rise? Ellen realized she could see a body lying nearby. Melvin, one of her own farmers. A cheerful, hard-working lad, if not the brightest, specializing in grains. Undoubtedly one of the cut throats. He'd died without making a sound.

And her own granddaughter, gone; no doubt already bones, scattered over that lonesome valley in the night. She and her sick husband and her legless son had listened to the girl's last words less than twelve hours ago.

Everything she'd tried to accomplish was turning into ashes. *Ellen M., get a grip! Best not dwell on the children now.*

She examined the sword. A project of Savage Mary's, these things. Carey seemed to like the idea, though no one had really trained on them yet. *Yes; these guys are night fighters and knife fighters*, she thought. *Bows, not so good in the dark. We're going to need a little bit of reach on them.*

Made from a chainsaw bar, this one looked about fifty centimeters overall; it was better balanced than she'd expected, and some effort

had been made to give it a sense of style. Double edged, full tang, with a straight integral crossguard, leather-wrapped hilt, and a heavy round pommel – pewter, maybe. She tapped her boulder with it; and it sang; not a sweet note like a farm bell, but "good enough for government work." Something like a Roman *gladius*, but more leaf-shaped. Greek-ish.

She could see what Carey was thinking. If you're going to have to go medieval, best bring a little *esprit* to it. *Semper fi*.

∴

Karen spent the entire shift on potatoes and onions, listening to Allyn and Vernie and Guchi carry on a good-natured male banter among themselves as they carried heavy pots – sometimes two men to a vessel – back and forth.

People had drifted into the Hall wet, and stood by the fireplace at the north end, steaming, then moved to the tables to eat stew or soup, or both, dipping oat cakes. Some could barely move, they were so stiff from the unaccustomed cold, or beat from climbing up and down the Butte in the dark, or sitting quietly in the damp near the Creek with rain down their necks. They could not stay long. These were the first shift of watchers in the night; their team members had spelled them, but they must return, bringing back food and water. Then they could make themselves as comfortable as possible and wait for the sound they hoped would not come: the shrill blast of the whistles.

War, it seemed, even on day one, was barely humanly possible. Thank goodness for the Hall!

Karen had grown up in a basement, with one other human being as her entire culture. Father had done what he could, explicating from the strange photographs in his magazines, to prepare her for a wider world should she ever encounter one. *Here is a scene at a coffee shop. This is the waitress, these are her customers; they are thanking her.* But now she had found a wider world; and it was not much like the magazines, at least until this moment.

Guchi was right; she was greatly appreciated whenever she put in an appearance, bringing a tureen of hot cream-of-potato to one of the tables. Weary smiles greeted her; mumbled thanks warmed her ears. Even the ones who were nodding at their bowls seemed grateful. A bit more of the ice around her heart fell away.

At length Tomma could be seen, picking his way toward them across the crowded, firelit room, with Emilio.

"K, gang, shift's over, changing of the guard." Tomma draped his long arm over Vernie's round shoulders. Each gave the other the companionable look of the long and comfortably married.

"Yes," added Emilio. "I will find your crew, Allyn, who have been

resting, and they will make soup and stew with me, yes?" Guchi nodded, wearily, and reached back to untie his stained apron.

Karen sourly noted, by the lamplight, stains on her jerkin, and vowed to find an apron on her next Hall shift. She drifted in Allyn's wake to a corner by the big fireplace, where someone had picked up a guitar and strummed a chord. Everyone apparently knew the tune; those nearby that were not sleeping softly sang with the musician:

*As we pause in life's pleasures and count its many tears
Let us all taste the hungers of the poor.
There's a song that will linger forever in our ears:
Hard times, come again no more.
It's a song and a sigh of the weary.
Hard times, hard times, come again no more.
Many days you have lingered around my cabin door.
Oh, hard times, come again no more.*

Carey Murchison, who had been out, stepped in. "Beemans and Jones, *fall in*; stretcher bearers. Anyone with bad knees, find a sub *now*. Move it!"

Bodies stirred, at first several, then more: about eight in all headed for the door. Murchison looked round the room. "Who around here can sew and doesn't faint at the sight of blood?"

That was practically everyone, but Karen found herself among the first three or four to stand up. Murchison beckoned. "That'll do; follow me."

...

The rains had settled down to a gentle mist in the night. The entrance to Chaney's farm was almost across the bridge from Hall, but a little bit upstream. They arrived at the clinic in very short order. The Captain saw the volunteers to the door and turned away; like Caesar, whose camp was attacked at night by the Gauls, he seemed to feel keenly the need to be everywhere at once.

Karen, who had lived in the clinic for over two weeks, felt sure she might know her way around, but the place was disarranged. Someone had brought in an old vanity with a very large mirror, and in front of the mirror, which was tilted slightly forward, stood a very large cluster of alcohol lamps. The light from these was effectively doubled by the mirror.

The large oak table had been pushed over into the pool of light, and here Dr. Chaney, the veteran Army medic, stood with Mrs. Chaney in attendance, quietly pouring liquid into, or at least on, a hole in a young man's leg. The patient watched with interest. The air near the table smelled of vodka, laced with a potpourri of comfrey and

plantain. Elsa Chaney looked up and saw the new arrivals.

"Oh, good," she said.

"Mmh?"

"The kids are here from Hall; now we can take on the tough case *and* the easy ones."

"Oh, yes; that's good. Now you, young man; that was a lucky shot. It missed your femoral artery, and the broadhead came out at the back nicely. And your friends have kept your leg away from dirt; I'm sure that will help. You will have to stay off this leg, though. Have someone keep you fed and watching you for redness, swelling, soreness, and fever. With any luck you can stay out of the line for a couple of weeks."

Though pale, the boy nodded, apparently put at his ease. "I – I helped put down the man that got me." He grinned.

"I'm sure you did; and you've joined an exclusive club today." Chaney clapped him on the shoulder. "Hop over there with Elsa's help." He looked round at the newcomers. "Ah, a very likely bunch. Elsa, I've seen this one" – he pointed to Karen – "she's handy with needle and thread."

"So I remember."

"So please take her on for the stitching of any of our walking wounded that need it; but first, let's all move our more serious stretcher case onto the table."

They all piled their weapons and bedrolls by the door, and arranged themselves, following the Chaney's example, round a young man lying on a bloodstained pallet near the wall. Many hands scooped and lifted, many hands gently carried. The barely conscious patient, sandy-haired and rangy, was longer than the massive table, and as they extended his limbs, his hands and feet dangled over the ends.

Dr. Chaney unlaced his jerkin and scissored away part of the soiled tunic beneath. A loop of small intestine, along with the cecum, protruded from a long slice that had been made across the belly, opening his diaphragm. The glistening entrails quivered lightly as the young man breathed. His arms and legs stirred in a spasm of pain.

"Hold those, please. Not you two; you'll have other business."

As they stepped away, Karen and Mrs. Chaney could hear the patient interview begin behind them: "Can you hear me? Yes, well, I'm sorry but you may be awake for this; you have my permission to faint. We're going to put something in your mouth, and you may bite down on it; 'k?" Mrs. Chaney opened the door to the observation room, Karen's old quarantine residence. A candle gave the only light that did not come through the heavy plate glass window from the "operating theater."

Three people were sitting here in chairs. One of them, a surprisingly elderly woman with an aura of command, sat naked to the waist with a

bandage round her middle, into which seeped blood from her side. She was trying to pull on a blue woolen poncho over her head with her good arm. Mrs. Chaney went to her assistance.

"Thank you, Elsa," the patient croaked, then coughed. "I'm not much for putting up with night air any more, I'm afraid."

"Hah. More than the rest of us put together, I bet. Karen, this is Ellen Murchison, our second-in-command."

Karen wondered how one salutes such a person on the Creek. She remembered a curtsy depicted in an old *Geographic*; such an incongruity! So she simply stood still with her arms by her sides.

"Ma'am."

"Thank you, dear; heard all about you. You'll help see to my friends here, I trust." She nodded to the two, a young white man and a black woman, and prepared herself to lie down with Elsa's help.

Karen stepped over to them. "Hello, Mrs. Perkins."

Mrs. Perkins smiled. "Hello, y'self, sweetie. This here is Elberd, he's a Joseph." The young man nodded gravely. Mrs. Perkins held a bloody cloth to her arm with her good hand. "This just needs washing and binding, and it can wait. I'd like to have kept the arrow, but it got away. We'll see to this young man first, hmm?"

The youth spoke. "She tried to stay and see if there'd be more fighting. But Mrs. M. found me and made me go get her before we walked out."

Mrs. Perkins put in, "And I was not in as good shape as I thought, but he helped me all the way down in the dark and never said he was hurt."

"I was embarrassed. Nobody shot me! In fact I never saw them. Things started happening and I ran toward the whistle and I think I fell down the mountain."

Karen wasn't sure where to begin. "Hi, I'm Karen. Ames. How is this arm?"

He was holding it cradled in the other, protectively. They were both startled by a muffled scream coming from the outer room. "I dunno. Busted, maybe. There's a clicking when I move it and it's getting bigger all the time."

Elsa, who had made Ellen comfortable, overheard this and came over. "This should have been splinted." She looked in his eyes. *Shock. He's worse off than he thinks.* "Okay, well, I think you will need to spend some time with the doctor, but he's busy, and in the meantime we're going to get you horizontal and warm, and we'll work on your face."

"Face?"

"Your cheek, dear; it needs putting back in place."

"Oh." He looked as if he might cry.

"Now, look. You *were* brave to be where you were, and practically

carried Lorena down that trail in the dark -- with a broken arm no less, so *no* need to apologize. Battlefields are dangerous in all kinds of ways; your face is going to have a brilliant scar and I think it will be quite *attractive* with it. 'K? Want some vodka before we start?"

"Ma'am. No ma'am, I think I can handle it."

"Right, I know you can; so, let's get you down and bring over some more light. Karen, here's a needle and thread; they've been soaked in alky. I'll hold the lamp for you. Let's wash that out as best we can and we'll see some running stitches; should take about thirty from here round to here, y'think?"

"Yes'm." Karen reached for the kit. She had not slept more than a catnap since dawn the previous day, and it must be getting on toward morning; yet she would give it her best. The lad had earned it.

...

James Lawson was nothing if not a proud man. In the light of a clearing dawn, with low fog down by the river, he looked over his domain with satisfaction. The house had been a small, sagging, moldering frame dwelling in a dark stand of fir trees when he'd chosen it. Crowded in by lilacs and vinca, roofed with moss, trash all over. But in the right kind of place, the top of a rise, with ground steadily dropping away in all directions. Now it was encased in thick stone walls with steel-shuttered windows, with a commanding view across his clearing to the woods beyond; there was no dead ground between. Most of the work had been making the clearing; now anyone approaching would have to show their hand.

Here he had chosen to stop running and make a home for his wife and three boys, now almost grown, and the five of them had gotten by on deer, fish and small game, some wild greens and foraged fruits, and God's own clean, clear water, which could be hauled up from their hand-dug, stone-lined well right in the kitchen. It was a crowded house, but James felt things might not yet be settled out there in the world; Soon, though, the boys would become restless. They'd want their own domains.

Where would they come up with women?

Not from those damned socialists over the hill, that's for effing sure. Effing commune! With taxes, no less. They all brought their crops to the old-timers in that old sawmill they used for a castle, like the prancing nymphs and centaurs in the old Disney movie. Godless left-wing commies; it's enough to make you sick.

They'd recruited *him*, too.

You all come on over here, they'd cooed, oh, yeah, lots for you to do for us and our lords and masters, you bet. His sons had looked interested, too, dammit. Maybe 'cause he'd explained to them about

the loose morals of those folks. He'd had to lay it on the line for all and sundry. No moving in with tax-obsessed socialists, no commerce with 'em, no nothing! He, James H. Lawson, was a man whose soul stood within the saving grace of Jesus, the Lamb of God, who would provide all things in season. Ask, and ye shall receive. And they had.

How did it go? The prayers of a righteous man accomplisheth much? Some such. A bible in the top bedside drawer of every effing motel in God's own country and he hadn't managed to bring one here. Or teach the boys to read, either. But he'd taught them how to kneel and pray, praise Jesus, hunt, fish, tan hides, make and keep a fire without matches, and use a kettle and tripod. They were all set. Now if only some *good* folks would come along and they could get a church going...

The two queers, that half-black abomination and the blond one, had made sad faces and gone off, and the next morning one of his boys had found a bag of oats on a stump. Didn't have a way to grow any, really, but it *had* come in handy last winter for porridge. Hated to keep it but it would have been a waste in a tough land, and it hadn't changed his mind any.

James came out of his reverie with a snap. Somebody was watching him, he was sure of it; and not that nosy little Creek kid on the mountainside, neither. Something was in the woods to the west.

His wife, sallow-faced, hard bitten – but who wasn't – a hard worker in whom he'd found a godly helpmeet, came to the door, drying her hands in a long apron. A wisp of her gray hair, which had been tied in a tight bun, hung over her face.

"Charity, get me the Winchester. Quick." From the corner of his eye, he could see all three of the boys coming up from the river, one of them carrying a steelhead, still flopping. Too close together, dammit! Their dog, an old yellow lab, had been frisking at their feet, sniffing at the fish, but suddenly gave attention to the woods to the west, and advanced in that direction, barking.

Charity turned inside and came back to the door with Lawson's old, oiled, loaded, and much-beloved model 1892 carbine. It was never used to hunt now – not enough rounds, and they didn't always go off. She reached it to him on the stoop.

"Get back inside and grab your bow. *Now*."

She opened her mouth as if to ask what could be the matter, but a small hole appeared in her cheekbone and she fell back into the living room.

As she did so, her husband heard the crack of a rifle. James Lawson spun around, jacking a .30-30 into the chamber of his carbine, but there was no target to be seen along the long line of cottonwoods to his left, nor beneath the distant line of Douglas fir and bigleaf maple to his right. His three sons should'ha dove into the tall brown grasses

of the clearing at the first shot, but they seemed momentarily frozen.

"Down. *Down!*" he shouted, but the distant rifle cracked again, once each for two of the boys, who fell over like puppets whose strings had been cut. The third one threw away the fish and ran back.



James had by this time assumed a prone position behind a steel tub that lay upside down in the dooryard. He still could not find a target. *Crack!* The barking stopped. Still no one to be seen. The tub leaped. A hole appeared in the steel, right in front of his shoulder, and he felt the bullet's impact before he heard the distant weapon's small thunder one more time.

James crawled for the house, carbine cradled in his arms. His crawling slowed, his breathing rasped, and he found himself fighting tunnel vision. Charity's bare right foot lolled in the doorway; he'd have to climb over it. Getting up those two steps was going to take enough concentration as it was, with so much water – where was all this water coming from? bubbling up his windpipe. Why was he dribbling? *Jesus, help me. Help me get those bastards! Effin' queers, I knew they were stringing me along. Effin' backstabbers.*

A sandaled foot appeared in his narrowed vision. "Scuse me, bud, I'll take that."

A hand reached down, secured the trigger of the carbine, lowered the hammer gently with its thumb, and pried the weapon from his failing grasp. Another hand grasped him by the hair on the back of his head, and tilted his face upward. No one he'd seen before. Beard; cheekbones painted black. Sad, expressive eyes.

"Hi. Name's Wolf. I'd ask ya yours, but ya don't look like you'll be needin' it any more."

And then James Lawson became no one at all.

...

Avery Murchison sat in his wheelchair and contemplated his fate. He, who had lived for sunshine, woods and water, and exulted in the strength of his limbs and the speed with which he could run, had had an ideal if rather strict childhood, really he had, and married a fine girl and raised an outstanding daughter and then it all went to hell in a hurry.

He'd been IED'd by his own side accidentally, while fighting a gang of half-starved bandits. His now-useless body had been carted to Chaney's butcher shop for a double amputation, and when he'd been brought home, months later, found himself a paraplegic and a widower – lost Juney to some illness the bandits had brought with them – and young Mo-reen had become his whole world, just like that. But the girl was determined to take his place in the security force, and was seldom home.

And now she had said, "love ya" to the three of them, Avery, Mom, and Dad, and drifted away in a wisp of smoke minutes later.

Being off shift after that, he'd taken the opportunity to get roaring

drunk. Then Dad had called and said that Mom was hurt, too, in a fight on Ball Butte. Not too bad, he hoped.

Not too bad.

He *hoped*!

Eff! What was all this *for*, anyway?

He'd begun to think, long ago, that his parents' project was cockeyed and doomed, and now he was sure of it.

Avery stared at the cement wall and its peeling battleship-gray paint; the wall stared back without comment. His parents had worked in this strange installation before the Undoing; they seemed to have some lingering idea that they would find someone to hand it over to, someday; someone representing a tribe, much bigger than the Creek, to which their ultimate loyalty still held.

They'd tried to explain, reeling off fragments of their world from memory: "... in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity...."

Not so many blessings, he thought. Not so effing much posterity, either. He looked sourly down upon his truncated person, stumps encased in neatly seamed trouser ends.

Nice chair, anyway. A lightweight, deeply cambered anodized-aluminum Quickie racer in candy red with black nylon webbing, it served, as did so many things in here, to remind one of all that had, apparently, been lost forever. Avery blew out the lamp and wheeled himself, with fingerless gloves on the rubber of the pneumatic tires, down the dimly lit hall through the open steel doorway to the command post.

Avery shoved himself over to the console with its buttons, LED lamps and vernier controls. None of it worked, so far as anyone could tell. But five floors below, lights actually glowed, after all these years, on another panel with two keyholes in it, five feet apart. Something was asleep down there that, apparently, needed no outside sources of power.

From here, through heavy quartzite windows that were difficult to spot from outside, unless one was up really close, he could look to the four horizons.

The rain clouds had mostly cleared away, tattering off to the east.

East. Fresh snow on the volcanoes – Dad had taught him to call them the old names: Mt. Jefferson and the Three Sisters; south, the Coburg Hills; west, the great Valley and across to Mary's Peak with a light dusting of snow near the summit, and north, Ball Butte, Maggie's Hill, and the long, faint line of what had been the freeway, with, to this day, a smattering of wrecked and abandoned vehicles in bright but fading designer colors. Artifacts of the world that had produced this

room, and its mysterious instrument panel, and that half-sleeping beast in its steel lozenge and thirty feet of concrete.

Something to do with the Murchison loyalty to the very country that, by their own account, had so ruined everyone's lives.

He looked, for the thousandth time, at one of the quaint cautionary signs, in metallic lettering, riveted onto the slanted console.

MAINS ENERGIZED? KEEP ALL CIRCUIT BREAKERS UNDER COVER EXCEPT WHEN ACTUALLY SWITCHING ON OR OFF. TO INITIATE PROCEDURE, CLOSE CIRCUITS IN ORDER FROM RIGHT TO LEFT. TO CANCEL PROCEDURE, OPEN ALL CIRCUITS IN ORDER FROM LEFT TO RIGHT. WHEN ALL CIRCUITS ARE CLOSED, AND ONLY WHEN ALL CIRCUITS ARE CLOSED, CONTROLS A, B, AND C ARE AVAILABLE. SEE MANUAL, DARPA SECDOC A25065A, PP. 22-32. INCL.

Available for what purpose? Carey and Ellen didn't seem to know. They had only been security guards, home for an easy break from the idiotic oil war which, as all could so easily see, was slowly killing Dad. And apparently no one alive today knew what the thing was for, or how long it was supposed to last.

Time to go to work. Avery glassed Ball Butte, for starters. There was activity there; he switched to the spotter scope. Ah.

They were collecting the dead.

Quite a few.

These were being loaded onto stretchers, and would be borne with reverence, friend and foe alike, to the House of the Dead at Hall Farm. Each would be carefully spread open, from head to foot, before being consigned, with a little prayer to Jeeah, to the long, low compost heaps at Common Farm #1, next door. This year's designated cemetery was every third heap. Would those be enough – with a full-scale war on at last?

Might have to resort to exposure, such as the Indians had done on platforms. Another way of giving back to Jeeah. Farmers might begrudge the "waste," but the vultures would not. And, of course, it was clear we could lose this one.

Exposure by default.

He supposed, given its current function, that particular "common" farm would never be settled. Or perhaps the cooks, who doubled as morticians of a sort, would move there. He wouldn't be surprised if, in another generation, they became priests! An odd little religion Mrs. Chaney had come up with. But she was an odd bird, anyway.

Avery looked down into the Creek valley to the east. He could not see the sunless farms under the brow of Ridge, but there was smoke from the kitchen chimneys of Maggie's, Lazar's, Beeman's, Jones and Ames. All good there. Beyond Ames was another Common farm, with

no buildings as yet. Couple of deer browsing in the open.

Activity caught the corner of his right eye. For a moment, Avery tensed, and checked for the throwing knives strapped to the arms of his chair. But the movement was the on-duty Ridge scout, back from her vantage point on the south slopes. Running, with strung bow on her shoulder and binoculars in hand. He could see the urgency of her efforts from here. Billee ran out of sight to the left around the rocks.

Avery twirled his chair and awaited Billee's entrance.

Billee paused in the doorway to catch her breath, then reported in.

"Sir. Lawsons are all *dead*." She looked at him bug-eyed.

Welcome to my world, child, he thought. "Dead or down?"

"Well, down, but there was shooting, and it wasn't them."

"See the shooters?"

"Yessir. They came out of the woods over thataway." She pointed west. And made a face. "They even shot the *dog*."

"Numbers?"

"Twenty, maybe twenty-five."

He raised his eyebrow.

"Well, it was hard to tell, they were back and forth so much."

At least she wasn't pouting. "Weapons?"

"Bows, crossbows. But the Lawsons were shot from an awfully long way off. I'm surprised you didn't hear it from here."

"Wrapped in this much concrete? So, at least one rifle."

"Mm-hmm." she nodded vigorously.

"Maybe a scoped weapon. Apparently taking no prisoners. Huh. Well, thank you. Go back and watch them some more, but *don't* be seen."

"Sir!" She departed on the bounce.

Yes, that would be the crowd that hit Ball Butte. Clearly making a flanking maneuver after getting their nose bloodied by Mom.

Avery smiled grimly to himself. He could appreciate the ironies. If these raiders knew how little the Creek can really defend itself, they would have come straight in by the bridge. The Creek might have gone down as easily as Lawson's.

Time to get on the horn.

∴

Elsa Chaney opened her eyes. By the shadows on the bedroom wall it must be nearly ten o'clock; she felt a moment's panic and then recalled that it had been a long night with the wounded, and that others were sharing the bedroom with her. She herself lay on the rope bed, in the narrow groove her body had worn into the mattress, stuffed with old crumbly foam rubber, that she'd made with her own hands years ago. Tom had worn another groove in it, next to hers, over time; they joked about visiting back and forth from valley to valley, but there hadn't

been so much visiting really; not for years. She'd given up four babies, each to bone marrow disease and then to Jeeah, and they had been taken gently away by the kindly farmers at Hall. She had wanted no more such sad emptiness after that; and Tom had understood.

He wasn't in the bed. Elsa looked around and found five young people rolled up in blankets on the floor; four boys, and that strange creature, Karen, who had walked alone across the mountains, told her story once, as if she felt obligated to do that much, and then mostly closed herself up. She was all "yes, ma'am" and "no ma'am," washed and stitched wounds, fetched alky and blankets, as directed, and then she would just stand there, waiting for the next thing, watching but not commenting.

Commenting was the life blood of the Creek; in the absence of a culture of media – no internet, phones, television, radio, newspapers or magazines, and few books and almost no one able to read them, everyone gossiped incessantly. Word of the girl's arrival, for example, had led to endless discussion and speculation on all the farms. Karen, in contrast, had been fed upon print culture from a bygone age. She was like the Elders in outlook, but like the young people of the Creek in having few expectations, fast reflexes, and some general notion of war as a norm. It might be on a very tiny scale nowadays, but war it certainly was.

For Elsa, war was *not* a norm.

She might, for all she knew, be the last of the old protesters. A liberal and a pacifist herself, she had stood on street corners among Quakers and Mennonites and waved a sign reading "Genocide is Un-American/U.S. out of Mexico" – dangerous and thankless, and by then very illegal, work, and that last time the little aluminum dragonfly had flown right up to her face and snapped her portrait and then she'd done time in a minimum security prison.

They'd all been released when the Undoing had halted sufficient deliveries of food and supplies for their guards and for them. Elsa had walked right out in her orange jumpsuit into the chaos and met Tom, who was patching hurt people on the streets: a policeman and a "rowdy," side by side. He was in blood up to his elbows and unremittingly kindly.

It was love at first sight.

She hadn't found her old friends. They'd held one more demonstration, she heard later, and the police had turned the truck-borne antenna on them and cranked it up to full power. The little aluminum-foil hats had not availed.

Peace was what she'd always sought, and with Tom, she had largely found it. They had had a few adventures on the edge of the horror that was the Freeway Corridor. Then they lucked into the community that the Murchisons were gathering into an abandoned tributary valley of

the Cascade Foothills, less than a hundred miles from Elsa's home town. Tom had, at Carey Murchison's urging, become the local "doctor" and she'd, because the Murchisons suggested every household should try to organize itself around food production, become the farmer-in-chief at "Chaney's."

There had been no one to marry her to Tom but herself; Elsa simply joined her life to his, and assumed his last name because she wanted to. The farm, and its crew, came to be called "Chaney's" – a signpost, in speech and usage, of where to go to find the doctor.

Karen was stirring; Elsa sat up in bed. The young woman was not a deep sleeper but she seemed very disoriented on waking. Elsa gave her time to get her eyes open and to get her bearings, then caught her attention, making gestures she hoped meant "tiptoe out" and "tea" and was pleased when Karen nodded. *Somebody ought to give that girl a hairbrush*, Elsa thought.

Fire had been kept going by the Chaney's crew all night, and there was hot water on the big earth stove in the long kitchen – one of the first such stoves – ovens really – that had been built on the Creek. Lydee, a girl several years Karen's junior, was tending fire and stirring rolled oats with plums and apple slices in a large kettle, for whomever might wander in for a late breakfast or early lunch. Hot water was available, and Elsa strained some through a mixture of dried and crumbled peppermint and sage leaves into mugs for herself and Karen. She offered both mugs; Karen chose green. Elsa watched her reading the text and then knitting her brows.

"Sixty is the new thirty." It was a joke mug. Somebody got that for their birthday."

"Oh."

Each waited for her mug to cool, then took long, meditative sips, watching Lydee serve up oatmeal in bowls to two young men from Bledsoe's. Both looked banged-up and bushed; one of them, a muscular fellow with a whistle hanging from a thong round his neck, seemed to know Lydee well and was chatting her up a bit while absorbing welcome heat from the fire. Now a veteran of battle, he was using his new-found mystique to "make an impression." Elsa found this both amusing and endearing, but with sad undertones. Karen watched, but seemed not to understand what was going forward.

"You did good work last night, Karen; I'm grateful. It was my job but my old eyes were giving out in that lamplight."

"Thank you." Karen sipped some more; her eyes inventoried the room.

Yep. Not chatty. "Is it all right if I ask you what you can do – sort of a skills list?"

"Yes."

"Well, umm, if you'll help me out here, maybe you could *tell* me

some of these things?"

"Oh. Read and follow instructions. Sew, a little. Leather: awls, punches, mallets. Metals: salvage, disassemble, lubricate, polish, reassemble; drill press, lathe, hacksaw. Molds and casting. Carpentry: hammer, plane, crosscut, rip, miter, try square, chisel ..."

Elsa laughed. "Okay, I get it. Your dad gave you the run of his work bench. I remember something about his work bench."

Something about the way that was put seemed to have been off-putting to Karen, who looked about to draw back into her shell. Elsa thought for a moment, then added: "Oh, 'the run of' is not quite quite. He wanted to make you a Renaissance woman, I'd guess."

"Excuse me?"

"An expression for – skilled in *all* trades."

"Something like that, yes, ma'am."

"What did he stress most?"

"Situational awareness."

This wasn't quite where Elsa thought this was going. "Oh ... could you enlarge on that?"

Karen seemed primed for the question, as if in recitation.

"*Don't look, see.* Once an area is secured, forage. Purify water. Avoid hypothermia, heat stroke, starvation, dehydration and injury. Apply wayfinding, judging of terrain, and inventory maintenance. If area becomes insecure, fall back on avoidance and escape; failing that, marksmanship, manual of arms, knife fighting, judo."

I just had to ask, didn't I? Jeeah help us! "Probably just what's wanted around here," replied Elsa with a hint of bitterness. "If I may ask – why?"

"He said that the core of any life worth living is self-respect. That one has to earn that through self-discipline. And that self-discipline requires clarity. All the rest follows."

"And this led him to stress ... fighting?"

"No, ma'am, not fighting, *clarity*. So as not to be led away from self-respect."

"I like some of what I'm hearing, but does that follow from –*fight* training?"

"Well ... you can't think when you're dead."

Karen took another sip of her tea and glanced over toward the door, which was opening.

Dr. Chaney, looking very much the worse for wear, came into the kitchen with Emilio of Ames Farm. "Ah, here she is. So, Emilio, have time for breakfast with us, or will you round up your soldier and go tearing off right away?"

"Hello, Karen, Mrs. Chaney. It is simple and not simple at one time. If I may carry away some oatmeal in a container, for my crew?" he asked Lydee. Lydee jumped down from her perch and, finding a clean

polyethylene half-gallon bucket with a handle, ladled mush into it.

Emilio nodded to Huskey, the young man who'd been talking to Lydee, and turned again to the Chaney's and Karen. "There has been word from Ridge that those who attacked us last night appear to have abandoned their camp downstream. They are seen to be making their way round toward the pass."

"Oh!" Elsa sat upright, spilling her tea. "The Lawsons!"

"For them, already, if I understood what was said, there is nothing to be done."

"I must go," said Karen to Elsa.

"Well, that is my other information," said Emilio. "Savage Mary has asked to have a look at you, and the Captain I think seems to favor this idea."

"But your family! And Mrs. Ames!" Karen was on her feet and half-turned toward the door.

"It is true we wish to have you with us at this time, and I am happy you share the feeling. So. Perhaps I have forgotten Mary's request in the heat of the moment. We can do one thing and then remember the other, yes?" Emilio seemed to make light of it, but his expression remained grim.

"Of course," put in the doctor. "Only right thing to do."

"Should we come?" asked Huskey, by the stove, putting down his bowl.

"No, Bledsoes should go back to Hall and await re-deployment at Bridge or Butte, as I understand. The Captain will want you soon. We are almost fifty going up the Creek already."

As Emilio said this, Karen ran round to the isolation room and scooped up her gear. Ellen Murchison lay there, still sleeping, as did Elberd, the young man with the cheek that had been peeled open. Karen had given him a mug of chamomile-peppermint tea in the wee hours, and watched him relax and drift away – the first person, other than herself, she had ever sewn up.

She slung her gear over her shoulders and headed for the kitchen.

Sometimes needle and thread is best, she thought. Sometimes bow and broadhead.

∴

Cougar came to the house, where two bodies were laid out in the shade on the north side, and found Wolf sitting in the doorway on the west, examining one of the rounds from the old man's Winchester.

"Wolf."

"Coug."

"That last boy, he's alive yet – just gutshot. Can talk!"

"Well, they're damned hard to hit from a scope, running like he was; I'm surprised I hit him at all. Outstandin'; let's have him up here for

some conversation."

"Wolf." Cougar ran off down toward the river.

Wolf reloaded the round, parked the carbine against the doorjamb, and looked inside the house. A couple of his men were going over the kitchen. They'd found the well and the pantry; there were, believe it or not, some cans of evaporated milk, and even a large gunny sack with a dozen pounds or so of oats in it. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen grain. His men, none of them over nineteen, had seen a few pitiful attempts at farming but winnowed grain was a novelty to them.

The place was situated in a sunny spot with a mountain at its back, a river full of fish at its feet, and had been cleverly rebuilt into a small, even cheery, fort. With a needlepoint hanging on the wall: "Give to God the glory." A survivalist and his brood. Wolf felt some regret for their extermination, but with the larger prize across the mountain going unclaimed as yet, and winter coming on, he'd concluded they had no time to try to recruit the old man. So he'd opted to invest ammo in securing a jump-off place.

"Boys, we got a guest comin'. Could we get this table cleared a bit, to make him comfy?"

"Oh, yeah, Wolf, you bet." They swept the breakfast dishes onto the floor with a crash.

Wolf winced. "Ah, now, be a *little* civilized about it. We might wanta use this as headquarters for awhile, or have it ta come back to for R 'n R. Tate, pick up them pieces and what's good, take over to th' sink. Chuck the rest out th' back away from th' path."

"Yeah, Wolf. Sorry."

Cougar and three others came to the stoop, carrying a listless and bloody burden. In shirt and pants, pre-Undoing style. Some of these loners really knew how to hang onto the things they had known. Might be a whole stash of nice clothes in the loft somewhere.

"Right this way, gennumen, lay him down on th' dinin' room table nice 'n easy."

They did so, and gently enough, considering.

"Now, if ya please, bring th' other three and put 'em in the shade of th' house, with th'old skinnies."

"Three?" asked Cougar, puzzled.

"Did I or did I not shoot two more boys an' a *dog*?"

"Oh, yeah! Dog!" Cougar grinned. Dog was much preferred to "long pig" – when they could get it. "Wolf." He touched his forehead and led his companions out into the sunshine.

Wolf looked over their find. "Tate, let's put somethin' behind this young man's head and give 'im a drink of water."

The boy looked about thirteen. Big, though. These fanatic patriarchs fed their kids well but didn't always train them well, he'd noted. Obsessed with freedom for themselves, they gave little of it to their

families. Anywhere in 'polite' society, by now this would be a grown man, responsible for his own fate. One result of such close parenting was the botch this bunch had made of meeting Wolf's arrival. *Let 'emself get mowed down like sheep. Sad, no kiddin'.*

Ah! Coming around. A spasm of pain in the region of the bowels made the boy's body arch on the table; he tried to roll over.

"Easy, now. Yah've been shot; we're here to take care of ya."

"Where's my Pa? Where's my Ma?" A tear rolled down the lad's cheek.

"Not much we can do for 'em, I'm afraid. Dead when we got here."

"How do I know *you* didn't kill 'em?"

"Ya don't. Might have to trust us. We're not here to trouble ya's; and I'm sorry to see what has happened. But we'd like to know a bit about th' folks over th' hill, if ya can tell us anythin'." Wolf patted his hand.

"Wh-why? N'why should I talk to you at *all*?"

"Ah, that's the spirit. I knew ya had some backbone to ya. But lemme show ya somethin'." Wolf's men had examined the wound and left the blood-soaked shirt half unbuttoned. Wolf undid the remaining buttons and pulled away the shirt, then lifted the boy's head. "See that? s'an exit wound. Yer shot from behind, I'm sorry ta say. And this on yah's shirt – see right here? – is not all blood. Yer folks give ya any idea what this means?"

"Yeah. Some." He was beginning to shiver uncontrollably.

"Yep. So ya might's well chat with me, son. I'm all the time yah've got left."

∴

Mary Savage, Ph.D., pushed her jeweler's loupe up to her forehead and rolled away in her high-backed office chair to admire the treadle machine. It had been found out there somewhere, back when the Creekers were ransacking the region, in a farmhouse full of antiques. The young folks, her apprentices, were moderately good at disassembly and fabrication now, and she'd had them carefully remove the sewing machine from the platform and set it aside for later use, then mount a gearbox taken from an old hand-cranked grinder and attach a weighted hacksaw to it. The saw went lickety-split when the foot treadle was rocked; just the ticket.

"Nice. Very nice, thank you much! Now, y'all take five, sip a little home brew, and let's start making a lathe for this thing as well. See, it's gotta to run a variety of tools, everything we can think of to do with it; and it'll give us a leg up on all kinds of productivity."

And we shall certainly need all kinds and then some.

Mary had taught engineering at Georgia Tech. Her specialization was tensile strength of materials, along with malleability and ductility. Well-trodden areas, but there had been some new discoveries, some of

them hers, in the properties of carbon nanotubes for example. She was visiting Oregon State, consulting for Chinese physicists on cost-control for wire-drawing machines, when all hell had broken loose. Cities, even this cute little one with its starry-eyed "Transition Town" groups and gardens up the wazoo, would soon be disaster areas. Mary had packed up her Tahoe with all she thought she might need, and left town on small streets and obscure roads, her route Google mapped and GPS checked.

Both of which crashed forever within half an hour of her departure.

A large-bodied woman with a bad back and worse legs, she'd known, of course, that she wouldn't get far, but giving in to fatalism was not in her nature. As luck would have it, she'd been pulled over by a state police car, robbed of everything, and dumped at an intersection right by a road sign that said "Starvation Creek." And here she was, chief engineer for a bunch – if it were possible – even more starry-eyed than the environmentalists back in town.

But so far, so good. They'd fed her for seventeen years.

Good chow, too. Considering.

One of the kids, beer jar in hand, glanced out the window. "Dr. Mary, we got company coming up to the house."

"Rogers'?" The farm was uniquely organized. Two separate households were maintained: Savage Mary's, as it was called, and Rogers. Rogers' crew farmed the whole place and a Common farm next door as well. They tested agricultural equipment from Mary's shop, and tried out other gadgets and schemes as well. Both houses were exempt from military service at the borders, as a rule; Mary's was vital industry, and Rogers' was responsible for Mary's security. To prevent their personnel from becoming an elite, both houses regularly rotated young people out to other farms.

"No, it looks like Errol, from Ames, with the orchard guy." Errol, one of the carpenters, had been one of Mary's trainees, and his knowledge of smithing, casting and grinding had come from the shops.

"Well, show some hospitality and hop to th' door, honey."

Errol and Allyn came in, cloaked against the fall air outside.

"Ma'am."

"What? Ma'am, is it?" she roared cheerfully. "Leave your Creek manners at th' door, and come out of all that fooferah, why don't ya?"

"Oh, we couldn't," said Errol.

Allyn explained. "The bandits are maybe heading to the upper Creek round the Ridge, and we're sent to greet them if they do. Lot of crews right behind us."

"Uh huh, well. And Ames and Jones in the lead. Got the most to lose soonest, poor things."

"Yes'm. Would you have more percussion caps ready to go?"

"We do. Box is on th' table right beside you. They're packed in fluff, nice and secure, about three hundred."

Allyn gathered it up carefully. "This will be a big help."

"So I suppose that girl, she's pledged to Ames now?" she asked Errol.

"Same as. She's never stated her intentions, but she has integrity and likes us."

"Uh huh. So I got a feeling she's not coming by to see me right away. Not surprised. Well, got a minute?" He nodded. "K, well, come back here –" she rolled into the next room – see what else we have for y'all."

Allyn and Errol followed her dutifully and looked to the corner indicated. Errol shook his head. "Well. Shops are busy, I see."

"They are indeed. We've made up about twenty of these so far." She hefted a short sword by its hilt. "They're stout enough to cut or crush, light enough to parry and thrust, and the pommel and cross guards can deliver a good whack as needed. Makes up for there being so few machetes 'round here. Not so good for sword and dagger, better with a shield; but y'all are all archers so never mind shields for now. Shoot till your arrows are gone, see, then draw this and you have an option when the bandits get social. Wear 'em in your belts till we can make up some frogs or scabbards."

They knew few of the terms but understood the language of her hands. "Never needs reloading," she added with a wicked smile.

"Like my axe."

"Mmh. But a little more versatile. You hang on to that axe, but have this young man stay next to you with one of these. Lacks symmetry, keeps the bandits guessing. Anybody carrying bush hooks?"

"Yes, a few," said Allyn, hefting a sword with his free hand. The bush hook, an axe-handled tool with a long thin blade, hooked at the end, was built in Mary's shops for clearing brush and maintaining hedges. They'd proved very popular on the farms.

"Same deal. Crews average three fighters, yah? One bush hook, two swords. Everybody watches everybody else's back. They get inside your reach, your swordsmen take 'em out. They mess with your swordsmen, *you* take 'em out."

"Hmm." Errol had looked a bit sourly upon the swords, but he was beginning to see the possibilities. A bright young man, though quiet and hard to read. She'd always liked him but wished he'd laugh more.

"Hmm, he says. I guess that will have to do." She rolled, casters squeaking, over to the doorway into the front room. "Hey! Y'all gather up all these irons down to th' road an' hand 'em out to whomever'll take 'em as they go by. 'K? – Waitaminnit. Somebody get me a tall one, *then* do it."

She turned toward Errol and touched his sleeve as they went by.

"Now, these things they're bringin' down with you, they take *years* to learn to use right, just like bows. But this size makes sense to a good fighter the minute they pick up one. We'll have to count on that for now. Who knows – maybe coats of mail some day. And, kid –" she locked eyes with him. "--do take care of yourself out there, huh?"

He almost smiled.

'It will have to do,' she thought, over her glass of home brew, watching at the window. *Our bloody motto. Sure wish we'd had time to teach these kids to read. And found them some good history books.*

∴

Wolf stepped outside; the bright fall sunshine had given way to high cirrus clouds and mackerel sky. The wind up the river had slowed, a sign that sunshine was no longer heating the slopes of the mountains upstream. Rain again within a day.

The men had already discovered where the big trout had come from: the geezer's boys had been on their way to the house from a fish trap in the river, made up of poles hammered into the river bottom in a jug-shaped pattern. Fish could be herded into it, then netted. This could be a resource. They'd also found a smokehouse with two deer carcasses and part of something else – bear, most likely, judging by the skins hanging nearby – hung up inside.

The "Luckies" were enjoying themselves immensely. Having been driven hard across the game-poor fen lands out in the big valley, the chance to rest, eat, air out some gear and just hang out had been more than welcome.

Wolf weighed his options. Movement, with superior force, had brought them this far. Now what? If he hurried his men away from this idyllic spot into a conflict in the rain again, he might lose some of his charisma, not to mention men and gear. On the other hand, if he waited for the food to run out in order to move them (this had worked before), he would lose the advantage of mobility and surprise, and the farmers would have time to strengthen their hand against him. And, nice as this spot was, it would not support his entire crew through the winter. If it would, that might be even worse; the geezer's very success here had taken the edge off his vigilance.

The dying boy's information might or might not be valuable. He hadn't been privy to all the old man's thoughts and information, clearly; and the old man had obviously conflated conjecture with observation. There were armed farmers just over the hill – Wolf knew that; they were *all* queers, nigs, wops, and commies; he doubted that. Just a determined assortment, sure.

Most anyone nonwhite, or Jewish, or disabled, or visibly mentally incompetent, or pacifist, lots of old people, too, had been pretty much

eliminated by the dominionist/white supremacist militias in the early going, with surprisingly strong assistance from the remaining elements of government. Wolf's own mentor had been a leader in some of that. Wolf wasn't sure it hadn't all been a mistake; it contributed to the current ammo shortage.

There might be a few holdouts among these people, though. Who knew what their "principles" might be? Not theocratic, seemingly.

The important thing was, they had crops. That bag of oats was a strong indicator.

The other bit of information the lad provided seemed overblown as well – that there were four hundred of these farmers. It seemed unlikely such a tiny river valley held such a large percentage of all the humans alive in Wolf's known world.

He unrolled his brittle road map again. That valley was just too small; long and narrow, with one dead-end road shown, coming out near the bridge. The thin blue line of the river – Starvation Creek, cute name – left the valley, turned the corner of a flat green spot on the map that would have to be the mountain here, and then meandered off toward the North-Running River -- "Willamette" on the map. *Maybe* a hundred people could hide in there and work. Maybe more. Amazing that they were there at all.

Eff. Numerous, well equipped, in possession of the interior lines, and observant. They'd be at the back door first. Magee would say, *look for an alternative.*

He raised his eyes to the south slope of the mountain. The map showed it as a tiny plus sign and an elevation in "feet," 1291. Grass, exposed rock, some shrubbery, and a few copses of oak trees. He felt watched. Nothing new; there were watchers on that other hill, and they had proved enterprising. The top could not be seen from here; meaning the watchers would have to come part way down to do their business. Hmm. He turned to his nearest men. "Hey."

"Wolf." Dill, one of Wolf's sharper-eyed crewmen, stood up from a blazing firepit he'd made with three or four others. Meat grilled on a spit above the flames.

"No, sit back down. All of ya's, do just like ya been doin'! But, Dill, I want ya ta watch that hillside *sharp*. But *don't* look like yah're lookin'. Rocks, trees, weeds. Anythin' moves, get up lazy like, without starin' up there, and come find me. 'K?'"

Wolf moved back to the house. The clothing found in the loft (right where he'd thought it would be) had been distributed, which boded well for in the colder weather, and a kind of bomb-shelter hideaway had been discovered, with a clever light source involving a pipe in the house wall, two mirrors, and a roof vent. Supplies stored in the hideout were being brought up to the kitchen table and distributed or repacked for later access – a constant problem for a crew on the move

was that they could take only so much with them.

Cougar and Tate were sitting at the table, sorting, laughing, and horsing around.

"Gennulmen, please! We've broken enough of this stuff as it is."

"Sorry, Wolf. Umm, some of this, we don't know what it is."

"Well, you can usually tell by th' shape; sometimes a picture. Like, this here is a can, n' it's heavy, 'n it sloshes. Lots of cans have liquids, but th' picture of th' cow suggests canned milk."

"Cow?"

Wolf rolled his eyes.

"Okay, boss, but – what's this thing?"

"That, Coug, is a hand-cranked radio."

"Radio?"

"Not gonna get technical, but they useta be a way ta listen ta folks a long ways off."

"Oh, yah? Could we listen to th' farmers?"

"Nah, knucklehead, not 'nless they hadda transmitter an' were tryin' ta reach ya. Hmm. Gimme that."

"Sure thing, Wolf."

Wolf pulled the crank from its niche in the side of the case. He twirled this about twenty times, to the amusement of his companions, then extended the antenna and switched on the power. Static erupted into the dim light of the kitchen.

"What's it doin', Wolf?" asked Tate.

"It's list'nin'."

"Not much to hear."

"No. Not much in a long time. See these letters by the stripes? This here's FM, which don't get ya anythin' nowadays; this one's AM; you might get Canadians. Not in th' daytime, though. Wish it had short wave."

Cougar and Tate were impressed, but had no idea what Wolf was talking about. They watched him fiddle with the knob. FM had, as he had opined, nothing to offer. AM was rackety, with whistles and whines that seemed to climb and sink as he advanced the knob. Then, faintly at first, and with some re-pointings of the antenna, Wolf was able to bring a live voice from the little magic box.

"And some of you might be trying to *believe* this adminstration wants to help you. You might be trying to *believe* th' so-called president when he says he's gonna bring back Social Security. I hate to tell y'all this but naive is *naive*. You're being taken for a *ride*, folks, we're all being taken for a ride. Lemme give ya some facts and figgers an' you can work it out for yourselves. *I* ain't gonna lie to ya, now, am I? Y'all know I'm just about the only one left that will tell it to you *straight*, ain't I? 'Course I am. Now, here's the numbers ... eighty-five trillion ameros ..."

The voice faded slowly away.
"Who the hell is that, Wolf?" asked Tate, who had stood up, astonished.

"That is – was – Burt Snow, Tea Party commentator."

"Was?"

"Yep, died two decades ago, when I was a kid. This, what we're hearing here – th' voice'll be back in a bit – comes and goes – is what's called a recordin'. Station runs on its own power, somehow. Where they found th' workin' electronics, I dunno. Has all its old programs in storage, as y'might say, and plays 'em over an' over. Mike Savage, Rush, Whitmire, all of 'em, goin' back over fifty years."

"Oh. Well, Wolf, c'n we listen to it some?" Cougar asked.

"Sure, sure. This thing'll run down in about fifteen minutes. Ya wanta keep it goin', jus' crank it some more. Before dark, round up some bodies an' go work that fish trap. I'm thinkin' we take a layover here tonight. Pass th' word."

"Yeah! Cool, Wolf."

"Coug. Tate."

Wolf stepped outside again. *Well, that was depressin'. KKVU, still on autopilot after all this time. Only station we were allowed to listen to in that prison. An' just down th' street, too.* Wolf felt there was something about it he was supposed to remember, but what that might be, he couldn't seem to recall.

Dill sidled up to him, acting nonchalant.

"Wolf."

"Dill."

"Gotcha somethin', I think."

∴

Karen strode along with Emilio and Vernie. She had longer legs than either of them, so she found it easy enough to do. Tomma was just ahead, talking with some people from Wilson's, and beyond some plum trees, on the left, she could see that he was stopping to talk with Errol and Allyn, who had come down from a cluster of buildings, dominated by a large white house, on the slope above. With them were several young people she'd not seen before, and they were all carrying, awkwardly, armloads of tools.

"Want one?" Allyn was asking Tomma.

"No, I've got all I can do to keep track of my rifle. Guess my belt knife will do."

"Me neither," said a Wilson. "I'm happy with my machete."

The Ames crew stopped by the gate, and Emilio, Kate and Vernie looked at the pile.

"Two to a crew, so I understand," said one of the strangers. She

looked at Karen. "Oh, I know who you are. Dr. Mary wants to talk with you."

"We are in front of Savage Mary's," explained Emilio.

"The, you might say, University of Starvation Creek," added Vernie, who picked up a sword for himself and handed another to Emilio, smiling.

"Rude," said the Savage Mary's girl.

"Didn't know I even knew the word, didya?"

"May I come see her when there is a little less going on?" asked Karen.

"Sure. Everybody's got enough to do. I'm Ro-eena." Very small yet about Karen's age, with red hair and green eyes, she offered her hand.

"Karen." They shook. Karen found the custom strange but felt she had best blend in as well as she could.

The Beemans' were right behind them. "Fair day, fair day," one of them shouted.

"Oops," said Vernie. "That means get along, we're holding up traffic."

"Fair day?" asked Karen, puzzled, as they resumed their march.

"You know, milling around like a crowd at an old-time country fair."

"I've never seen one."

"Neither have we," put in Emilio. "I think may be it expresses both a sorrow and a hope."

...

Mary Savage, Ph.D, awoke with a start. She'd been napping in her chair again. *One of these days I'll fall off here and crack my head. Do me good.* She opened her eyes, and found them looking back at her from the wall mirror. *Oh, god!*

"Dja' call, doc?" One of the apprentices was always nearby – something they'd decided among themselves apparently. Annoying.

"What, did I say that out loud?"

A bronzed – no, very black face with a high, thin nose – Deela's, a lad with very good hands at the forge, looked round the door frame.

"Yes, afraid so. Troubles?"

"Troubles! Yeah, troubles. See if y'can take away this frickin' mirror. Every time I wake up, I look a little bit more like Jabba the Hutt."

"Who-bah-the who?"

"Never mind. Something my grandmother was crazy about. Showed it to me when I was about yay high." Dr. Mary extended a hand, palm down, knee level above the floor.

"If you say so." Deela, bemused, came in and took down the mirror.

He stood with it for a moment.

"Seriously, away!" Mary shooed him with both hands. "I hope never to see that scraggly old hag again."

"K, will do," he grinned.

At the door, Deela almost collided with Selk, the electrotech, who seemed in a hurry.

"S'cuse me." Selk backed away, and after Deela departed, came in again. "Doc Mary?"

"Mmh?"

"Been checking the radio, three times a day, like you said –"

"Hope you haven't been converted by any of that crap they play?"

She wheeled around and beamed at him. Selk, a fidgety, hunched and nearsighted lad, knew more about wires than anyone at the Creek besides herself and Carey Murchison, partly because he could see wires up close; certainly he was no good for sheep-tending, the main activity at Rogers' Common, or archery. Somewhere, he had found prescription glasses. They helped – barely.

"Uh, no. Well, *some* of it I like, but, anyway, got something new."

"On KKUV?"

"Mm-hmm. Still nothing else out there. Right at noon, there was two-three minutes of ... dunno, new material. I got th'recorder, she heard maybe the last two-three sentences."

"Ro-eena?"

"Yeah, doc. Call her in?"

"What ya got her skulking out in th' hall for? Hey, Ro-eena! C'mon in, for cryin' out loud."

Ro-eena, the recorder, entered, a bit tentatively. Despite their bravado, some of Mary's crew found her a little intimidating; Ro-eena was one of these.

"Whatcha got?" asked Mary, elbows out, with her fists on her knees.

Ro-eena closed her eyes, as if she were listening to the afternoon breezes, then recited. "... if any of the following are hearing this, please consider re-careering with Magee, 26233, and his New Rogue Valley Volunteers. We have what you're looking for; lots of action, lots of opportunity. Branson, 34028. Lockerby, 28212. Mullins, 31817. Wolf, 334 ...' and there it ends."

"I'm sorry, Doctor," Selk put in, "but the station fades in and out every eight minutes or so."

"Not enough signal, maybe. Ro-eena, hang out with me a bit; I'll have you repeat that and I'll wr – no, tell ya what, run down to th' Mess Hall and see if you can find th' Captain; our compliments, and repeat that to him as you did to me. Pronto!"

"Yes, Dr. Mary." Ro-eena turned on her heel and fairly ran though the doorway.

"Selk!"

"Right here, Doc."

"Let's see; you're on a car radio, right?"

"Yes, it's from a nineteen-fifties Chevy pickup. Pre-modern entirely. We're running it from an arvee battery; doesn't really hold charge, but the marine generator, which we have sitting in the rapids across the road, turns just enough to trickle it up to where it will run the radio those three times a day."

"And you've been randomizing. Noon. Hmm." Mary drummed the fingers of both hands on her knees.

"You have that look," Ma'am." Selk knew the look; change in the wind.

"Yeah, well. Carey M.'s got better juice than we do; I know it, though he's cagey about it. That solar panel is not as well hidden as he thinks. Furthermore, I think he's using it to talk to the hills; from what I hear and can see for myself, there's been some rapid response that bears no other explanation."

"And?"

"*And* so, I think we should send you right behind Ro-eena with that radio and a good long loop-wire antenna. See if he'll agree to let you take it up to Avery's little hideaway. Be a hell of a better signal acquisition there. Shoulda done this long ago."

"Woo, sounds like fun." He turned to go.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. About th' randomizing. Y'all get that thing going up there, see if they'll put a listener on all the time. And especially noon ... midnight ... ahhh, six in th' morning, six in th' evening. 'N then straight back here. Got an idea for that little generator."

"Yes, ma'am."

"None of that *ma'am* crap. I ain't one 'a them committee-fied "elders." Get crackin'."

"Yes, ma'am."

He departed, grinning.

Oog, thought Mary to herself. What was that old song? *Oh, Lord, won't ya buy me, a nice lower back ...*

Mrs. Ames was getting tired; no, dog tired. Not that she'd seen a dog in more years than she cared to think about. Milking eight cows was work, and now she and Juanita and the two boys were treading water, so to speak, to keep the place going. One of the boys was on watch at all times, four hours on, four off, so, really, it was just the young woman and the old woman, moving the cows, milking, feeding. Thank goodness there was a pump in the barn, for the stock watering and the washing up, but it was hard on the back, even so.

It's only been a day, and we're way behind already.

If the other farms missed their "soldiers" like this one, there would

be a lot of crops not got in before the rains. How long could this go on?

As much as ever, she missed Charles and her own children. They'd had the bad luck to be an interracial couple when the last banks closed and the trucks stopped running. Charles was originally from "the projects" in Chicago, and the kids both looked like him. That bastard Magee, with his Kluxers, had got them. She was the only one Charles had managed to hide in time; if only those sonsabitches could have found and killed her, and not them! Then she would not be facing emptiness, day in and day out, with a shadow on her heart.

These young folks, now; it was a help to have them to look after, but, really, it was getting to be the other way round. She napped every day between the morning and evening milkings. And it seemed like it was harder to get up each time. The elders had decreed, backed by the GM, that most of the cows, as well as the bullocks, should be spread around the valley soon – a good thing, too; her efforts as the cattle breeder had paid off. There should be four new yoke of oxen trained by next year. She looked forward to having only Florence, with the occasional calf, to look after.

Raoul appeared from around the corner of the barn, looking for her. The twins helped where they could, between times in the crow's nest; a nice family.

Her family now.

"Mrs. Ames, there are a whole lot of people coming up the road."

"Well, why aren't you beatin' th' bell and fortin' up?" she asked, alarmed. She put her hand over her heart; it was beating double quick, both from the terror and from standing up too quickly.

"Oh, ma'am, they're ours! I saw Dad and Miss Karen, and Mr. Allyn from Wilson's, out front, and Mom is out to the road to greet them."

"What, back so soon? Well, see if there's water on th' fire, hon, and I'll come down soon's I get the critters settled."

Mrs. Ames stumped round past the house and found the youngsters already clustered by the gate. Juanita was chatting excitedly with Emilio; Raoul and David hung from his arms on either side. Karen was talking with Allyn; it was obvious to Mrs. Ames, and everyone, except for Karen, what was going on there. Nice boy, but cruising for a fall, if she was any judge of women. Vernie came up the flagstone walk.

"Ma'am."

"Hi, Vernie, what's news?"

"Well, as you may have heard, Mo-reen Murchison was killed yesterday, direct assault. No parley, just went straight for her. And then we lost six or seven people in a fight on Ball Butte last night. 'N some hurt, 'bout the same number. Might lose one more; Doc said peritonitis is the main trouble with these knife fights. Medicines being

not what they used to be."

"Jeeah's help, Vernie; at that rate we'll all be dead in a week!"

"Well, there's only thirty of them – no, twenty-five or so. They didn't take the Butte. Most of us here are heading up to the saddle to see if they're coming round to here. Got food?"

"Plenty for now, anyway. Oh! You mean for you. You all come on up and get whatever you need!"

Karen stepped up, taking in the surroundings as always. She looked a sight with her bow, quiver, knife and steady, all-seeing eyes. Where had she been, that all this seemed so – normal – to her?

"Hello, Mrs. Ames."

"Hi, honey, and what do you think of Allyn?"

"The apple guy? Likes to talk, I think."

"The apple guy," she says. "Are you fixing to break a heart?"

"Ma'am?"

"Oh, never mind. Come in and let's see if there's baked potatoes left over. *And* some apples."

∴

Billee put down the heavy binoculars and stretched. They were an old model, built a century ago. Intended for use with a tripod, they'd lost that long ago, and she used now a forked stick for support. Still, it was wearing. Her pulse affected the thing's usefulness, and she'd learned to deep breathe, then let out her breath slowly, watching through the eyepieces only a few seconds or so at a time.

To the left, men were lugging something to the smokehouse. It looked like – oh, never mind that. These people were dis-gus-ting. Killers and worse. People, that was one thing, but she would not watch them drag that poor dog around. Directly in front, there was activity on the porch. To the right, a couple of cooking fires. It really looked like they might stay the night.

She held her right hand out, crooked her fingers, and counted from the sun to the horizon. Three hands, or as the old people inexplicable put it, "ours." Must stay till dark this time, so as not to be seen. Meanwhile she depended on this rockpile covered with poison oak, dressed in its lovely fall colors. Not likely to be seen here, in the thick stuff.

Habitually, she looked around for late-season rattlesnakes. It was cool now, with one more moon before winter, and last night's rain had put a damper on things reptilian, but better safe than sorry. The little diamondbacks, more numerous every year, were a pretty tame lot, but it would be rude to step on one, and they had little tolerance for rudeness.

Billee found the bald-faced hornets much more of a concern, but

the nearest nest that she knew of was forty meters west. They too were calming a bit with the change in the weather. Not much to worry about out here, except for the creeps down below. She sat up slowly, lifted her scope and stick, eased the scope into position and swept the Lawson place again. Four – no, five men going down to the river. *Wait. What's that sound?*

She listened again. Nothing.

Still, best be ready. She capped the binocs, both ends of each tube, and stuffed them in their case. Propped in their crack in the basalt, they might stay dry. She scattered the handful of leaves over the crack that she kept handy for the purpose. Moving slowly, slowly, she strung her bow and picked up her ready arrow.

Listened.

Could be anything. *Let it be a deer. Let it be a deer.*

A smattering of small raindrops pattered the rocks. A pebble rolled, somewhere off to the left. Then silence. Turning her head imperceptibly that way, Billee watched that area, maybe sixty meters off, with her peripheral vision, attuned to movement.

Nothing.

Maybe she imagined it?

No! There it was! A man, focused on her hiding place. Stone-still, one of the creeps. *Shit, shit, shit, made!*

Could he see her? She didn't think so – he was stalking her position. She'd been seen, somehow, from the Lawson's. They were being smug, and had sent a collector.

Billee could wait until he approached, and shoot – or do a rabbit-run, and hope not to be shot with a weapon, if he had one on him. Waiting presented the problem that there might be more than one of them. Running presented the same problem, but if there was only one, this would be the option to take.

Have to chance it.

Taking another deep breath, this time in an effort to get the numbing panic out of her legs and arms, she put down the bow, dropped her fanny pack, picked up the water bottle from it, took a short drink, rinsed her mouth and spat. Then she grabbed a baseball-sized stone and bolted.

She reached the hornet's nest, hanging from a poison oak bush in a cleft in the rocks. After she'd passed it, she turned and pelted the nest from seven meters away. There was a satisfying thump and the nest swayed. Turning on her heel, she darted up the mountain just as the man reached the cleft.

His yelling was music to her young ears. *Hah! Creeps.*

Emilio, Juanita and Raul came into the kitchen and found Karen, Tomma, Vernie, and Errol sitting down to steamed greens, which were mostly kale and fava leaves. Mrs. Ames was pouring her version of "green drinks," hot water strained through mint, chopped herbs and vegetable leaves. They had stocked up on baked potatoes and venison jerky for the overnight maneuver, and had also made up a sackful for Emilio.

"Good evening, friends," said Emilio. "I am thinking, if this does not go so well, there should not be anyone here tonight. The crew leaders for Wilsons, Jones and Beemans agree. Mrs. Ames, if the animals all are prepared to be without you awhile, I would say let us pack you and Nita and the boys for a night at Hall. The Wilson people will wait for us all by their bridge."

Mrs. Ames had anticipated this, and there was not much that needed to be done. David was called down from the lookout, a few possessions not already in packs were gathered, and additional hay, comfrey, and beets, with such grain as could be spared, were made available to the cows and chickens.

The full complement of Ames were on the road before nightfall.

The Wilsons bridge was on the left, beyond an apple orchard, a few hundred yards' walk. Five of the Wilson residents welcomed the two women and the twins from Ames, and departed along the road into the night with them. They traveled armed, and no one carried lights. A steady light rain had begun, and the darkness was thick, but every Creeker had experience in navigating the road by the contrast between the night sky above and the even darker trees, fences and hedges at either hand.

Karen half expected Allyn to be waiting for her at the bridge, but as the whistleman for Wilsons he had duties across the Creek. Emilio, Tomma, Vernie, Errol, and Karen trooped in single file across the Wilson bridge and up the lane toward the farmstead.

"Word?" – a challenge came from ahead.

Emilio gave the expected reply. "'Jonathan! Word?"

"Gravenstein!"

"Good evening, Stannin. Ames coming in."

"Wilson greets you. Jones and Beemans are here; Holyroods and Lazars are coming."

"Has every noncombatant been sent to Hall?"

"Yes; word got to the Holyroods and Lazars last, that's why their crews aren't here yet."

They came up to the main house. Its windows, along with the loopholes of its outbuildings, faintly shone with the glow of alcohol lamps. Voices came from within; a few people were sitting out of the

rain under a pair of large redwood trees that had been planted in the yard over a century ago. The Ames crew joined these and sat, wet-haired and damp-clothed, in the darkness. The difficult march ahead, under the conditions that had arisen, weighed heavily now on all minds, and most conversations became muted.

Karen preferred to stand alone; sitting for very long in the cold reduced one's readiness in case of the need for action. So did conversation. In spite of herself, she began to shiver, rattling her trash-bag poncho; the wool cloak she was wearing underneath it held out some cold, even when wet; but the leather jerkin beneath that, which some of the rain had found, robbed her of heat. To distract herself from her discomfort, she recited inwardly, as she sometimes did, pointers which Father attributed to his favorite author: *Do not think dishonestly ... do nothing which is of no use ... an elevated spirit is weak and a low spirit is weak ... maintain the combat stance in everyday life and make your everyday stance your combat stance ... be able to look to both sides without moving the eyes.*

The other crews, as it turned out, had been right behind them. Stannin's voice challenged twice; other voices answered, and the available forces had gathered.

Allyn appeared from the night, with other leaders. "Emilio?"

"We are here."

"Numbers?"

"We are five."

"Nice; there are only twenty-eight of us for tonight; three crews will be in reserve and will come stay here later. They'll relieve some of us in the morning. Does everyone have plenty of rations? Water? Gear?"

"We do."

Allyn was apparently in charge. Even in the dark, he looked pleased with himself; but not overly so. A good man, even among these well-meaning folk.

Other groups approached the tree from the house and from beneath the other redwood.

"K, here's the deal." Allyn raised his voice to reach all ears. "We'll file up the trail from here to the saddle. Wilsons will be on point, and will drop down the other side a bit and spread out on picket. Each picket carries a whistle, a little higher pitched than mine. Jones will spread out in the saddle and be prepared to go to any whistle. Holyroods go left and spread out along the crest, left flank. Lazars stay together behind the hill and get some rest. Beemens and Ames go right and spread out as far as you can toward Ridge, one every fifteen paces. We're setting dispositions now because we're late getting up there and will need to keep quiet. I know that's a very thin line, but it's the best we can do. If they hit us, we raise all the ruckus we can, so the crews at Wilsons will know to get ready for trouble. But they

really can't come to our aid till daylight; we're the only ones at all familiar with the hillside. All set?"

Various voices gave assent.

"K, let's get our hike on. Give each other three or four paces, so we don't all slap ourselves silly with wet branches." Allyn's voice conveyed a wry smile through the clouded night.

...

Avery Murchison rang the spare buzzer. This would call together the entire crew, who might be anywhere on three of the four floors below; there was an elevator, but it hadn't been run – if it *could* run – in the lifetime of anyone now living at Ridge. The stairs were a problem for Avery; he could get up and down them himself, but it was a slow and undignified process. From time to time, he felt the need to oversee his crew's efforts, and the strongest would form a two-person carry, then fetch the wheelchair for him. That seemed somewhat undignified as well; so he generally resorted to an "all call" to the control room.

Eight bodies hurtled up the stairs. Avery believed he felt no sorrow for himself at the sound of so many *feet*; but his distant manner left no doubt that he'd known loss, and would rather run than wheel. First to arrive was young Billee, who had been resting in quarters after her ordeal of the afternoon; the others came in after her, one by one.

"Evening. Take a seat." Steel folding chairs were numerous in the facility. Ridge crew members, five men and three women, took chairs from the stack by the smooth black basalt wall and arranged themselves, by custom, in a circle in the square room.

"Billee here has had an adventure, as we all know, and it seems likely we'll have visitors soon. I understand everything still outside has been brought in? Good. We've done a fair job of maintaining the front and back door; they match the hillside reasonably well; but the windows can't really be helped. They are likely to be obvious, though they're rather one-way. If the bandits possess explosives we could be breached. Billee's bow, and the big binocs, had to be left behind. Do we have a spare bow?"

Wilson Wilson, a son of the original orchardist on the Creek, spoke up. "Yes, sir. I have an old compound that's not too big for you, Bee, and six good carbon broadheads to go with." He smiled.

"Ooh, thanks," said Billee. She leaned forward, eyes alight with anticipation.

"Very good," said Avery. "So, other bows?"

"Two; yew-wood longbows. About – " they consulted briefly – "thirty arrows."

"Crossbows?"

"Five; seventeen bolts."

"And the Ruger Old Army, which I recharged with powder and ball today." Avery looked round the group. "Not much; but we have the home ground, *plenty* of provisions –" this brought smiles and chuckles – "and lockable steel doors throughout. We don't expect everyone to converge here; at the moment, Hall is safer from our guests than the trail would be. So, Ridge is part of the front lines instead of castle and keep. Savage Mary sent us someone on a science mission, but the Captain's holding him at Hall tonight.

"We can't risk having anyone outside in the dark; tomorrow we may try to link up with the crews on the saddle." Avery nodded toward the east. "We're the right flank. If our guests get round us tonight, Hall could be in trouble. Wendlers, Tomlinsons, less one fighter, and Gulicks are spread out at the bottom, with Hall in reserve. That's not a lot of defense to meet twenty-four well-armed and very experienced men." He let that sink in.

"Back when we only had six or eight bandits at a time, we found that dealing with them was hard work." He didn't look down, but everyone remembered how he'd lost his legs. "So, we're going to batten down tonight. Wilson, keep me company, we'll do watch and watch. Billee, go the rounds and see that each floor has its food and water and the lamp wicks and fuel are in good order. Two to a floor, doors locked and barred, all entry refused except to this knock." Avery rapped the table in a pattern all knew, though none of them had heard "shave and a haircut" sung. "Sleep tight. With any luck, *we'll* be fresh and dry at daylight and any *visitors* will be wet and tired. Then we'll see. 'K?'"

Nods all round; sober but unfrightened faces. Along with their friends the Ball Butte Murchisons, this crew considered themselves the elite defenders of the Creek.

"Good; hop."

They folded their chairs away and filed out. Wilson went with them. to retrieve his gear. Avery could hear Billee in the stairwell, haggling. "Look, you each have fifteen arrows; maybe you could give me *one* each? Then at least I'd have *eight*."

One of a kind, thought Avery. *After today's doings, Bee will be a very good nickname for her!*

:::

"Don't mind about the girl; she knows her way around up there; that's all." Wolf smiled. Dill had returned from the south slope of Starvation Creek covered with stings; his right eye was swollen shut, and his breathing was labored. He also seemed depressed at having been bested by a child; but he had not returned empty-handed.

On the table between them lay a lightweight bow; several arrows to match, a leather-bound case containing a beautiful pair of air-raid

warden's binoculars dating from World War II, which she had tried to hide away, a *fanny pack* (when had he last seen such a thing?) containing an oddment of possibles, including an old lip-balm tube which had been refilled with scented grease of some kind, a steel water bottle, and a packet of large leaves containing a half-eaten cake, redolent of grains and apples. Last, but not least, there was a badly rusted steel sign, about a foot wide and two feet high, with tiny holes at the four rounded corners.

"This interests me the most, Dill; and the fact that you had the presence of mind to pick it up, and go back to acquire the kid's toys, after what you'd been through ... well, I'm impressed."

It took a lot to impress Wolf. Dill, sore as his ass was, sat up straighter. "So, what's it say, Wolf?"

"I'll tell ya; th' thing's had a lot of weather, but th' writin' was – smashed into it – as well as painted. 'NO TRESPASSING.

INTRUDERS WILL BE ARRESTED. SECURE AREA. USDHS.'

Now, you say that there had been a fence there?"

"Yeah, Wolf. They'd took it all away but it looked like it was concrete-anchored posts and chain link, with a trail along th' inside, and it went right around th' mountain. Saw some old razor wire, too."

"So these folks may have somethin' more goin' on than just gettin' straw in their hair. Huh. Thanks a whole bunch, Dill; you go get some rest."

"Wolf."

"Dill."

Wolf made the rounds of the campfires. From each group, he got a sense of their morale, which was high after the day's feasting and plundering, and he made sure they'd remembered to set sentries. Before dawn, they would take up their war gear, and go have a look at the peasants' paradise.

As he came up to the house, Cougar met him on the steps.

"Wolf."

"Coug."

"Gotta tell ya 'bout somethin' we heard on that radio thingy."

∴

Carey Murchison felt what he thought of as pain-in-the-gut more and more these days. Willow-bark tea was not going to cut it; so he rode out the storms of red-in-the-eyeballs hurt either by himself, till they passed, or otherwise tried to look quietly introspective in a leaderly way. Others, he felt, habitually looked to him to think his way through these emergencies, so when he ran out of ideas – and in this much pain, who has ideas? – he bluffed his way through, for the sake of Creek morale.

The current spasm went on much longer than usual. Fortunately the runner was out, to see if non-combatants had thought to clear themselves out of upper Creek, and to pass on Murchison's strong opinion to the effect that they should do so if they had not. Avery had not called since reporting on little Billee's near miss on the south slope – busy with dispositions to lock down the Ridge overnight and anchor the right flank. So no one was present in the command center to witness that "the Captain" had doubled over and almost fallen to the floor in a faint. He was reaching for a half-finished cold mug of peppermint-chamomile tea when the radio kid knocked and entered, without waiting for a "come in." Carey looked sourly upon him, but the effect was lost on the nearsighted eyes behind those thick panes of glass.

"Sir, if I can't go up tonight, perhaps I could demo our idea down here?"

"And what would that involve?"

"I'd connect the car radio to your twelve-volt current – you do have twelve-volt, right? – it would be quite safe; I have an in-line ten-amp fuse here. The doorbell buzzer can't hurt the radio or vice versa. The output wires go to a speaker – I have one here, but, in fact, they will run your 'phone – the impedance is not too much of a mismatch – and also Mr. Murchison's on the Ridge! That way you could both listen to any broadcast messages – as reported by our recorder to you today – if the antenna does any good, here in the shadow of Ridge."

"It sounds like you just need something to do; I've heard the message. If, as I suspect, they're just repeating the same one over and over, I don't see the advantage of rushing this. We can haul this up the hill and set it up for you; we understand the principle. But it might not be for days if ever; there's a war on. Do you have more phones that could match up with the three we have? *That* I could use."

Uh, no, sir, dynamics were superseded long ago."

"More's the pity. But you have lots of car speakers and computer speakers and such; could you rig up some kind of intercoms? One for Wilsons would be super, and one for Bridge and one for Mary, just for starters."

Selk gave a look of astonishment; apparently he'd not expected this line of thinking from the "Old Man." "Umm, you know, I think we just might!"

"Well, that's a priority. Go back to Mary's – you can find it in the dark? It's quite safe to do so at the moment, I *think*. Thank her for the blades. And propose, from me, a crash program in communications. And please – *beg* her for me – we appreciate the expertise and the industry that have gone into making the percussion caps, but when can we have some cartridges – with *primers*?"

This last was said with some force, and poor Selk jumped, but

maintained his composure, and turned to go. Carey called him back.

"One more thing. Could you *also* say to Mary that Carey her friend would love to see some kind of hand grenades – if there's enough powder."

"Yes, sir. What are 'hand grenades?'"

"She'll know. Hell, soup cans full of nails and screws and BP, with a five second fuse, would be just lovely. This here is hill country, and we need to be able to reach behind these boys and spank 'em on the butt."

Selk's eyebrows went up behind the glasses.

"Umm, I'll see what I can do, sir!"

∴

Long past midnight, Ellen Murchison hobbled across the bridge to the Mess Hall with a limp and a crutch. She also had a fever and a cough, but she reckoned there might well be worse things happening than whatever her condition might be. Good information was not to be had at Chaney's, and so she came looking for her husband, or anyone who might be able to fill her in.

Hall was packed; it looked like the scene at some Red Cross shelters she'd come across in days gone by. Many people from farms on the upper Creek had decamped from the anticipated invasion point, and most of them had come here. In the dim light from alcohol lamps and tallow drips, bedrolls had been spread out along the walls and among and even on some of the tables, and though many people, among them women with children, oldsters and a few disabled, were asleep or attempting to sleep, others were up and about, and a clattering came from the kitchen.

Ellen made for the stairwell down to the pantries, where a door led to the command center.

"Ellen!" She turned, painfully, toward the voice. It was Velma Ames, the cattle breeder. "I heard you were in hospital! Have they turned ya loose? Honey, you don't look so good ..."

"Seen Carey?"

"Oh! He's popped up a couple times, mostly hides in that damp basement. Shouldn't ya sit down, then?"

"No, m'better'n I look, honest. See you in a bit." Ellen pressed on.

Getting down the stairwell with the crutch took more doing than she'd anticipated, especially when she had to negotiate two cooks in the dark, bringing up a large sack, but eventually she came to the door and gave it her customary knock.

Indistinct voices came from within, but she could tell that one of them was Carey's and he had recognized her knock. The door opened, with a whiff of old tallow – the room was not sufficiently ventilated –

and Huskey, the crew leader from Bledsoe's, stood aside to let her in.

"Ellen, what in the effing *hell* are you doing up?" asked Captain Murchison, who was sitting across the broad table from her, with the Creek map spread out before him.

"Same thing you'd be doing, Murch," Ellen croaked. She looked him over, and was shocked to discover his condition had worsened since she'd seen him last. *If a man shrinks in a week – practically right before your eyes – how long before he fades away completely?*

"Well, it's obvious you're here without Dr. Chaney's permission. How'd you get the crutch?"

"Stole it. Got time to fill me in?"

"Sure. Mr. Huskey, close the door, please, and join us."

"Yes, sir."

They huddled round the map beneath the lantern.

"We've got about thirty people here. I *think*." Murchison stabbed at the map with his finger, in the vicinity of the Starvation Ridge saddle.

"And fifteen or twenty in reserve, at the bottom. Elevation between them is a couple of hundred feet, though, and there's just the one steep trail, so the reserve can't get at a fight quickly if it develops at night. Or, for that matter, in daytime. Everything is muddy now. We'd have asked them to move up closer, but that north slope is all tangled thickets, people would lose touch."

Ellen nodded.

"Up here –" he indicated the Ridge facility – "is Avery's bunch, about ten in all, hunkered down till daylight, with plans to feel out the situation at dawn and try to hook up with Allyn's crews."

"So there's a gap in the line."

"A big one. And Avery's been blind since about two in the afternoon – they jumped his lookout."

"So, she dead?" This was offered hopefully; capture would be so much worse.

"No; got away! So we don't know where the bandits are right now. With any luck they're still skulking around Lawson's; they had two battles and a long march, then slaughtered everyone at the homestead, so I'm guessing they won't move till daylight, with all this *terra incognita* in front of them."

"But you don't have any confirmation of that."

"I don't, which is why we're scattered all over, not knowing their movements. It's an effing mess. Now, right above us –" he drew a line from the Ridge to the Bridge – "we have *nobody*. They are little likely to come straight at Hall, not knowing the terrain, but it's an intolerable gap, with everyone descending on us. So I've pulled three crews across the Creek –" he nodded at Huskey – "on the *assumption* that there are no more armies like this one approaching Ball Butte or Bridge. They can cover between the Ridge trail and the drop-off above

the Bridge; then tomorrow we'll scrape around and see who's had enough rest and resupply to send toward whatever develops."

"Well, Carey, that's just about what I would have done." Ellen turned her head – her body was too stiff – toward the young man. "Do you have the shotgun?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"When's your jump-off?"

"Soon as possible. I was just leaving."

"K, if you have time, send somebody to Chaney's for the revolver and the powder and ball kit. But," she smiled, "umm, don't tell 'em where I am."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am. Captain." Huskey disappeared into the hallway.

"A good one," remarked Carey.

"Yes, he had a lot to do with how well it went up at the lookout." Ellen gave in to a coughing spell.

"Girl, you are a sorry mess. When I looked at you last night – in the morning rather, you were out like a light and looked like you would sleep a week."

"S'just a cold. Murch, it's you I'm worried about." She covered his hand with hers. "Why are you melting away on me?"

Carey looked at the wall. The silence stretched on. Tens seconds, twenty. She gave him his own time; he'd always taken inquiry into his health as an invasion of privacy.

Now he looked at the ceiling, then down at their hands, fingers interlaced, and finally again directly at her. "Ellen, it's bone cancer."

"I *knew* it! The effing *DU*. I never did like it that you were on the old LAV-30Fs."

"Well, it was my *job*; I didn't ask for it; they posted me." He smiled sheepishly. "Enjoyed it, though."

"Shit. Liked it! Effing *killed* yourself liking it." Tears filled her eyes. "So, how long have we got?" *I will not fall apart.*

"Y'know ... lot of other ways to get radiation poisoning; I'm sure I'm not the only one on the Creek, either. Me? ... maybe two months. If that crowd over the hill doesn't get us first. Or their friends."

"And nothing we can do?"

"Girl, there was nothing we could do back when there was *something* we could do! And now, for pain, I drink effing *peppermint tea*."

"Oh, Murch."

Murchison withdrew his hand. "Ellen, we got a lot to do between now and then. Identify weaknesses, find some strengths, encourage new leadership, and, assuming we're not too badly damaged in the next week or so, batten down for the winter and make it through to spring with grain and animals intact!"

Without you and without Mo-reen, she thought. *Dammit!*
"Ellen, I know what you're thinking, but you should see the shape you're in. A cold these days is no joke, *and* neither is a wound, even a small one."

"True. What have you got for sore throat?"

"Try some of this stuff; mostly chamomile, with a little honey. S'cold, though." He poured a mug for her. "Were losing two of your fellow patients already."

Too much dying. "I make that ten of us, plus all of the Lawsons. What's *with* these intruders, anyway?"

"They're just the same as us. *We* lucked into a sheltered area with clean land, replicable foodstuffs, and enough labor to run it; they didn't – till now. That might be the only difference – oh, and that they've had more practice at killing, lately, than we have."

"Did you get a look at the bodies? They must have been brought here."

"Ours or theirs?" he smiled grimly.

"Theirs. I shot them all, except one, I think – Huskey brained him – but it was too dark to get much of an impression."

"I'm surprised you didn't get at least one prisoner for me."

"Sorry about that, but we didn't know how many we were dealing with."

"Well, I can tell you. All white, male, muscular, tattooed, shaved heads, bumpy faces, and war paint. Makeshift clothing and weaponry, some effort toward camo."

"Kind of a skinhead militia?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Magee. He's back."

"It's the look he cultivates. But I think he's in Roseburg."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Why do you think that?"

"Remember KKUV? He's broadcasting from there."

"No!"

"Yep. I think he's out of touch with this bunch – but he's looking for them, or some kids enough the same as makes no difference."

"*Jeeah*, Murch, they all get together, no more Creek for sure."

"That's right. We're going to have to go all out, I think. Which we're not yet focused enough to pull it off."

Ellen collected her crutch. "Murch, I really, really love ya, but I think I better get a move on now."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Got some focusing to do."

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Cougar proudly looked down again at the Glock 17 in his right hand.

Eleven rounds was all Wolf gave him, but it represented a promotion of sorts. With Willets and Burgoyne both history, he and Dill were the closest thing to non-coms Wolf had.

Well, Cougar would give it his best.

Dill had been given the Winchester and been told off with one man to hold the "fort." There was enough food there to last them all for days; nice to have it to fall back on.

The day was dawning damp but foggy; a good sign. Fog meant the rain had stopped and might hold off a while; and the hillside was slick enough as it was. The going had been anything but easy in the dark, and the gnarly clumps of brush and random boulders made direction-finding in the cloudy night all but impossible. There was "up," and that was about it. But now, with a little light, Cougar could see that the ridgeline was close at hand – and the tops of tall trees behind it bespoke a very different terrain on the other side.

"See, it's all kinda open over here cuz' that's th' south slope," Wolf had said at the briefing. "Don't spend too much time in th' red bushes; it's poison oak. Dill's gonna break out something fierce." he'd grinned. "When we get to th' top, there might be a welcomin' party. It's gonna be trees an' underbrush, which'll hamper bowmen. If they're spoilin' fer a fight, they'll pop up on th' ridgeline and we take 'em out. Aim high, 'cuz it's steep an' will throw yer aim off – theirs too. Don't hang around, though. Attrition gets us nowhere.

"If there's a fight, it means there's a trail on th'other side. We find a trail, we stick together an' bust through. Break out into th' valley. My idea is, either they all run, as we 'uv seen before. Just chase 'em down an' take 'em out. *Or* we take some farmers hostage – *women*, if we're lucky – get a peace deal with food fer th'winter, *or* failin' that, get 'em to rush us across th'open –" he waved the AK for emphasis – "'an' even out th' odds. So, wing an' wing. I'll take eleven and go left; Cougar will take nine and go right. Space out evenly. Exploit any holes and then, down th'other side, converge on th'middle.

"Remember, it's all for one an' one for all; if we are all gonna have enough to eat between now and next summer, it's *over that hill*."

It was not much of a plan, Cougar could see that. But if Wolf proposed it, likely nothing better was available. And Wolf was right; people had always run. Until a couple of days ago.

He looked along his line, from right to left. Everyone was about even; Chuckie excepted, who'd sprained an ankle and had had to crawl to keep up. Bows and crossbows were at the ready. Across the draw, he could see Wolf's line, a little ahead of Cougar's. Wolf had sent a man ahead a little, to spy out the ridge. No activity to be seen there; maybe this was going to be easy?

"Hein."

"Coug."

"We're only about fifty paces off th' top; push ahead slowly, taking advantage of cover, and see if y'kin get up there and provoke somebody. We've got 'em within pretty easy bowshot from here if they bother ya any."

"Right, Coug." Hein took off his bedroll, and, checking his knife, quiver, and crossbow, hunched forward and crept from rock to rock toward the saddle.

When Hein had gone about twenty paces, he suddenly stood up, uttered a vexed grunt, turned sideways – which showed a crossbow bolt protruding from his back – and pitched forward onto his face, legs thrashing.

"Hit 'em!" Wolf's voice came across the scree at mid-slope. Something was going on over there, as well.

Cougar shouted. "Pickets! Find 'em, kill 'em!" Running toward the boulder behind Hein's position, Cougar found a man, foot in stirrup, cranking a crossbow. He pointed the Glock at his chest with both hands and squeezed the trigger. It barked, and the bowman fell backwards against the rock, his mouth open. Bodies were squirrelling around all across the slope. One of Cougar's men had flushed another picket, who was swinging a long bow at him. Cougar aimed and fired again, but missed. His man stepped back, and after the bow had swung past, stepped in and put his knife into the farmer. Two for one! Were there more?

A whistle shrilled, farther up the slope. Several heads popped up along the ridgeline. Cougar aimed, but it was a bit far for pistol work, and they were prairie-dogging – looking, then hiding, then looking again. An explosion came from above – there was a gun up there! Black smoke drifted off to the right, and one of Cougar's men sat down, holding a hand to his collar-bone, blood seeping out between his fingers. An arrow passed close to Cougar's head, high.

Another picket stepped out, aiming a crossbow at one of Cougar's crew. Cougar fired, and dropped him. Cougar ran forward. Where was that rifleman? Ah, there's the arm up there, ramrodding. Still too far. Crack! That must be Wolf's AK. The rifleman's been hit. Crack! Crack! Wolf's finding targets. "C'mon! Over the top!" Wolf's shout. "Let's go!" shouted Cougar. He ran, much as one can run over loose rocks, bushes, and mud, uphill.

More whistles. The ridgeline! Aha, lots of targets, trying to stay low. Cougar picked out the next to stand, a bowman, arrow drawn. No, a girl! The pistol jumped in his hand. Huh – women fighters. One less bow to worry about, but what a waste ... two men, rushing him with *swords*, no less. One took an arrow in the chest, the other Cougar shot. How many rounds left? Boom! another muzzle-loader? Way off to the left. Aha! Here's the trail. "Bunch up! Bunch up! Let's go, let's go, let's go!"

A frightened-looking red-haired girl stood in their way, with an arrow nocked. Cougar aimed the Glock, but one of his own men stepped in the way. She loosed, but a branch deflected the arrow, missing them both. Cougar and his man reached her at the same time, with the same idea. Cougar rapped her over the temple with his pistol barrel, and as she sagged, dropping her bow, the man – Mellow was his name, the big guy – scooped her up over his right shoulder, his bow in his left hand.

Three more shots from the ay-kay. Wolf was covering the rear as his forces reformed on the trail and ran down through the cold, wet brush toward their new Shangri-La.

Or whatever it might be.

...

There was a fight going on. Karen could hear it, but could not see it. She kept her bow ready, but nothing was happening in front of her. To her left, she could see Vernie, but not see what he was doing. Still farther away, Tomma stood up, aimed, and fired the Hawken. Then he sat down, pulled his ramrod, charged his weapon with a patch in his teeth, set the patch, rammed it, reached for a ball, dropped the ball down the barrel, lifted the rod again, and a shot rang out.

Tomma dropped the Hawken and cradled his left arm, with a look of distress on his face, and Vernie ran to him. They seemed to be arguing for a moment, then Vernie finished the ramming, took a percussion cap offered him by Tomma, stood up cautiously, aimed and fired. Karen saw all this from the corner of her eye as she continued to scan the slope beneath her. Nothing there.

As quickly as it began, the fight seemed to be over. No! something was going on over at the trail, around to her left and across the draw. Karen checked in front of her and to the right, then looked down the steep hollow. Men were running down the mountain behind her, strange men, and one of them was carrying a body. No, it was struggling. Marcee from Lazars'!

Karen could see that there were two openings, through the Douglas firs, ahead of the main body of invaders. It was already a long way down. She trained her bow on the first gap. As they began to pass through it, she loosed. Too high! She set another arrow and shifted to the second gap. Two or three men reached it, bunched up. This would give her a chance. She loosed, and had the satisfaction of seeing one of them begin to limp, accepting help from another. Too low, but something. She wondered if it would be safe to shoot at the group carrying Marcee.

"Karen!" It was Allyn, down the south slope behind her. She stepped up onto the saddle and looked down. He was hurt.

"Should I come to you, or pursue? They've got Marcee!"

"No, I'm ... I'm fine here; I've just got a bolt in my left –" They both heard the 'fwip' of a crossbow. For a moment neither knew where it was, then Allyn discovered he'd been shot again with a second bolt, to his right arm. He sat down hard. Karen could see the attacker; a wounded bandit who, abandoning the crossbow, drew a knife and staggered toward Allyn. They were ten paces apart.

Karen knelt, drew an arrow, aimed it, and loosed. It struck the man near his collarbone and went through him to the fletching. He went to his knees, then began crawling toward Allyn. Karen drew again, but by this time Emilio had appeared from nowhere, and with one of Savage Mary's short swords hit the man twice around the region of the neck.

He moved no more.

Emilio checked the scene for movement, saw something that interested him, walked to some bushes and raised the sword again. It flashed in the morning sun.

Karen heard a honking sound, and, in spite of herself, looked up.

A flock of Canada geese passed low over the saddle, in a wide-winged vee, heading for their ancient flyway on the Big River. Their shadows passed over Emilio as he tucked the sword in his belt and walked back to Allyn. He beckoned to Karen. She replaced her arrow in the quiver and ran to help.

Allyn had fallen over, but was trying to sit up. Karen supported him, and then braced him as Emilio drew the bolts, ripped cloth, and tied the wounds. Such blood as flowed was dark; no arteries had been cut. Allyn turned a pale face toward her. "Kinda mucked it up, didn't I?"

Emilio responded. "We were too few to do more than we did. They are a little weaker, now, I think, and soon may be they will begin to wish they had not come here. No more talk, my friend. Karen, I am going to carry this man across my shoulder; ready an arrow and follow me; you are rear guard. We will bring all our wounded to Wilsons' and then seek another opportunity to meet with these gentlemen."

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"Could we put Allyn down, Mr. Emilio? His left humerus is articulating in the middle." Karen, following Emilio's fireman's carry, did not like what she was seeing.

The surviving crew members of Ames, Jones, Wilson, Holyrood and Lazar were gathering themselves together in the sunny open spot in the middle of the Starvation Ridge saddle; the very place where, only two months ago, Karen, alone, lost, cold and starving, had tried to hold off the fighters from the Ames and Wilson farms. She was

hungry again this morning, but had no idea what had happened to her bedroll, with its stash of baked potatoes and bean cake. Karen was cold again, too; the sunshine seemed bright but not very warming. Winter coming.

Stannin, from the Wilson farm, one of those who had helped carry Karen, unconscious, down the steep path on the north slope only two moons ago, lay still with his arms splayed back across the wet brown grass, not far from where Karen was standing. A small amount of blackening blood had dribbled across his nose and cheek from a tiny-looking hole in his forehead; she could see from here that the back of his head was missing. Not far from him, barely breathing, lay Aleesha, from Lazar's, with a bit of small intestine protruding from her back. She had been brought from the woods to the east of the opening, and across the grass could be seen a wide and darkening blood trail. *These bald-headed men are like a cancer*, Karen thought. *They have to be stopped.*

Emilio was discovering that he was the only crew leader alive on the hill, apart from Allyn, whose shattered arms were bleeding again through the bandages. Mr. Molinero squatted by Allyn. "Can you hear me?"

"Mmnh..."

"We are going to splint your arm; the bone has been broken. When we carry you down, we don't want to cut an artery. Breathe deep, if you can, and let out your breath slowly. Try not to fall asleep."

"*Mmmh-mh!*" But Allyn was already drifting. Errol came up, with a handful of long thin sticks and some duct tape.

Emilio stood up and turned, to see Karen, with a bow in each hand and two quivers of arrows, and behind her Vernie, supporting Tomma, who also had an injured arm. Vernie was carrying the Hawken. Several others had assembled, one of whom, like Tomma, had been wounded in the left arm, and was carrying a Lyman muzzle-loader in his right.

Emilio was torn.

Three or four people were sitting or lying down, also wounded. And Emilio had himself counted six dead. The anger welled up in Emilio's chest. *They have trodden upon us like ants.*

One part of him wanted to drop all the wounded, with water and food to hand, and take all the able-bodied in pursuit of the foe. Another knew it was Creek policy to bring in the wounded for care ASAP, because delay was so often a death sentence in the absence of strong medicines.

Errol, working over Allyn's arm, spoke up quietly. "Sir," he said to Emilio, "while we were collecting ourselves, I heard another fight going on below us." He indicated with a nod the narrow trail down into Starvation Creek Valley. "I believe the Ellers, Reymers, and

Peachers sent us their relief crews on schedule, and I think, from the sound of it, they were unprepared for the bandits coming down."

"Those men are well away from here," said Tomma. "They'll hole up somewhere, and with any luck, our people will surround them."

"Yes, we may get another chance," put in Vernie.

Karen gestured with her bow. "Two of them are hurt. It will be a down payment."

"You saw them? Wounded?" asked Emilio.

"Yes." she answered, with something in her expression Emilio had not noticed before.

This information seemed to decide things for Emilio. "We will bring everyone down. If the rifles are not loaded, Vernie and Errol, do so now, and cover our advance, point and rear guard. Everyone else, shed bedrolls and enough weapons to carry wounded, please, two by two where possible."

"Need some help?"

Those who were in good enough condition to do so turned toward the voice. Wilson Wilson, looking fresh and hearty, with a revolver in a holster on his hip, stood, arms akimbo, on the slope above them. Four of the mountain's crew, armed with bows and a crossbow, were with him.

"It looks like we missed the fun; but we're game. Give us some folks to carry for ya, and ya c'n bring some more of yer stuff. I'm bettin' you'll need it 'fore th' day's over."

Everyone got busy. Karen stepped closer to Aleesha. She wasn't breathing now; it was clear she would not be among those carried down the mountain this morning. Squatting down by the girl's head, Karen took her hand for a moment, and felt the life going. "I'm sorry," she said. "Would have liked to get to know you."

She stood up again to take her place in line. The spare bow she was carrying was Aleesha's.

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Ellen Murchison rode, pain stitching her side, on a plow-gaited farm horse, her crutch behind her back on an improvised sling. She was in too much pain to wear a belt and holster, so an improvised saddlebag made from greasy cloth bumped along by her knee. *Ah well, dignity was never our strong suit around here*, she sighed – which led to another coughing fit.

It would take almost three hours at her present pace to get to Wilsons' from Hall; she bespoke everyone she encountered, looking for soldiery, and had collected surprisingly few – an even dozen marched along desultorily behind her: a few bows, bush-hooks and improvised spears.

Murch was a good Marine, but he was armor – armor tended to think geography. Ellen had been MEU, and her war thoughts turned more naturally toward sociology. The invaders, she reasoned, would keep together whenever possible, to concentrate force. If they had been seen at Lawson's, it would be an acceptable risk to draw personnel from Bridge, Ball Butte, and Maggie's Hill and seek out and destroy this enemy there, or meet them decisively should they force the saddle. *Where* did not matter nearly so much as *who*. Make guess, take risk. This enemy must be seen off to non-personhood at the very first opportunity. But where was she to find enough people? It was already too late to bring back everyone from all the uncontested positions.

The Creek had always struck her as the longest of long shots; as command structure had disintegrated following the failure of the last several resource wars, she and her husband, the two remaining security guards at the Ridge facility, had at last accepted that no one was coming to relieve them, and finding the entire valley abandoned with most of its resources intact, had persuaded, over the years, a number of people to settle there rather than keep running, as everyone had seemed to be doing, northward. The migration was understandable; average temperatures were up – drought and radiation sickness were a problem everywhere to the south, along with interracial clashes and general mayhem. Canada, which no doubt was finding its long border indefensible, had become a kind of Mecca for most. And almost no one had the knowledge or the means to grow food.

Murch had shown considerable leadership in persuading passersby that they would find a bird in the hand worth two in a hypothetical Canuck Land. Best to stop here and pitch in with the picks and shovels, yes? Some had shaken their heads and passed on; some had attacked – and become compost; a few, at first, joined the Murchison's budding tribe, and accepted the dual roles of farmer and defender. Then more, and then more; Ellen sometimes thought too many. There had been mistakes, crop failures. And so many just up and died.

The problems had begun to appear insurmountable, and the winter of '46 had been almost unbearable. For over ninety days there had been no rain; there had been all of four heat waves of more than forty degrees Celsius, in which few could do much beside go and sit in the dwindling Creek; then there was too much rain, right at harvest, with a raging Creek and much flood damage; then the terrible freeze; then the "flu" thing had carried off many. After that, the deep snow that had stayed and stayed; and in the midst of the snow, when everyone was hunkered down, had come a clever group of bandits dressed in white, who had fought their hungry way to the doorstep of the Mess Hall and been despatched there.

Murchisons' was the nearest farm to the Bridge, to set a standard of courage and preparedness, from which many had willingly taken example. Yet too few had been available to rise to the defense of too many; and her son, to Ellen's eyes the best and brightest, had lost both his legs in that grisly business.

And here we are again, mused Ellen bitterly. Little Mo blown to bits. Murch, like so many elders of the Creek before him, at the end of his rope from "industrial poisoning." Untold casualties left and right.

Ellen coughed again, a long racking spell.

But I'm not the self-pity type. Better not start, she warned herself, looking up at Savage Mary's on the left as she passed the gate. *That old bat would laugh me down the river, for one.* Ellen patted the farm horse's neck. The half-Percheron gelding, tall and deep chested, relished the affection.

"Mrs. Murchison, Ma'am?" A couple of the Mary apprentices had come down to the gate.

"Yes?" Ellen begrudged reining in, but perhaps she could use these two – and any others they might bring.

"Dr. Mary's compliments, and could you use some bottles of black powder?" asked one, a small red-haired young woman. The other, a very dark-skinned young man with a high, thin nose, added, "Captain Murchison asked for 'grenades' and this was the best we could do at short notice."

They hefted a small wooden crate of what looked like wax-stoppered 750ml wine bottles, with several inches of stiff cord protruding from each stopper.

"Yes, we could. How many have you?"

"Five BP, right now," said the lad. "We feel badly about the glass, but metal containers were not ready to hand. These are packed with all our current powder and some old laser toner, and a bunch of broken glass, pebbles, and such. And the other seven, the green ones, are Molotovs, mostly vodka and sheep fat."

The lass added, "Those have a powder charge at the tail of each fuse. Untested, sorry to say, ma'am. And we have a box of brand-new matches, with strikes, tested!"

"It will be very much appreciated. If those bombs break, I think they will still go bang." Ellen saw that they were both wearing swords. "Young lady, could you run up and ask Mary to send along anyone she can possibly spare, including anyone from Rogers', with all possible weapons? And that includes *you*."

"She said she expects that. 'Now is the time for every good man ...'"

"Yes, I know that one. *Hop!*"

"Yes, *ma'am*." Red hair flying, the girl ran up the hill.

Ellen had slowed her horse, but not stopped. Turning painfully on the bare gray back, she addressed the young man. "I think it will rain

again. Do you have a cover for those?"

"Yes, but it's okay, the fuses are genuine pyro, waxed. Fizz a nice purple color."

"All right; well, come with us. Protect the matches carefully; as we go along, distribute and explain the bottles and the matches to everyone, and get them to take about half an inch off the fuses; we don't want any of those thrown back at us."

"Yes, ma'am." He smiled, showing two rows of shining teeth; better looking teeth than almost anyone at the Creek had, these days; Ellen included. *Hope you get to keep that lovely smile through the end of this day.*

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Wolf was as satisfied as he could be under the circumstances.

He was down to nineteen men, two of whom were chewed up some but could put up a fight if necessary, and he'd managed to conserve ammunition well. Lo and behold, so had Cougar. They'd made hash of that new bunch coming up the trail, mostly with their arrows, bolts and knives. No way to know the numbers, but it had looked like about ten, half of whom must be dead and the rest non-ambulatory – there had been too much hurry to double-tap – so along with that pugnacious lot on the hill, he reckoned the farmers were down by about twenty.

With whomever this lot lost on that first night, they must be carrying a third of their good fighters on casualty lists, tying down quite a few more. Odds had evened a bit, yes.

He looked around him. Such high living he hadn't seen in a very long time. If ever. Even the homesteaders in the stone house had a primitive set-up compared to this! Here was what had been a "living room" in days gone by, and it was a living-it-up-room, so far as he could see, to this day. What looked like fresh paint or whitewash on the walls, ceiling. There was a mauve couch with matching plush chairs, patched on the arm-rests. With them there were polished wooden lamp tables with real lamps on them that smelled of vodka. The wells of the lamps had been stuffed with bits of red flannel to look like old-time red lamp oil; a feminine touch. The whole place smelled of women; not the bow-carrying kind they'd been encountering, but breeders and curtain-washers. Incredible! Over here were paintings hanging, framed no less, of landscapes and animals and people's faces, done in what looked like berry juices on parchment; but done with care for all that; someone had had the *time*. And over there was some kind of skinny thing like a guitar, mostly soundbox, along with two gourd rattles and a small drum, all hanging from the wall, each decorated with beads and little chicken feathers. *Dubyah-tee-eff!* Looked they'd been leading the good life for decades!

While he, Wolf the *Lucky* and everyone he knew was living from hour to hour, skulking from ruined warehouse to shattered office building day in and day out, living by necessity on *long pig*.

To heap insult upon insult, outside the window – through real glass no less – stood an effing *orchard* – pruned and somehow mowed – apples, he recognized, some still unpicked, with a lot of other things – grape vines, and some kind of nut trees. With barns, and sheds, and gardens, and somewhere around, clucking *chickens*. It boggled the mind. An effin' insult, what these people were! Death would be too effin' good for 'em.

Cougar came in, the Glock stuffed in his belt.

"Wolf."

"Coug."

"Boys are pretty riled."

"Don't blame 'em."

"Wanta know, so can we have a go at th' girl arready?"

"Nah, hold 'em for a bit, yah? Reasons of state. Y'all've felt 'er up a little, but bring 'er in here in one piece now, so's she an' I c'n have a little chat; detail a few ta watch, so's y'don't think I'm pullin' rank fer a joyride." He waved the AK at the walls and window. "This buncha farmers is a *unbelievable* effin' deal; I wanta know what she knows about what's downstream here; numbers 'an disposition an' layout, an' what all's goin' on up on that mountain up there."

"Thinkin' 'bout Magee? Wanna bring him in?"

Wolf narrowed his eyes. "Don't let's get ahead 'v ourselves, son. We play this right, we might be able to make *him* ours 'stead'a *us* his, if ya follow me."

Cougar dropped his gaze. "Wolf, that's why we're *your* bunch."

"Right y'are! Sorry to lose Hein an' th'others, but we're sittin' pretty compared to how we might 'a been. Get'er in here, an' some witnesses – an' get these outbuildings occupied, we need a welcomin' committee fer anybody tries to come here, either from that bridge up by th' road, or behind us from th' trail."

Cougar touched his forehead. "Wolf."

"Coug. Oh – Coug."

Cougar pulled up short by the doorway to the hall. "Wolf?"

"Yer man Mellow's good w'locked doors; have him bust open th' pantry an' give ever'body a good feed."

"Wolf."

"Coug."

Wolf leaned his rifle against the wall. Almost time to turn the two duct-taped magazines around. He'd wait a bit before shedding his Kevlar. Comfort was just not to be thought of. *Wish t'hell I'd brought more stuff. Was no way t'do it, though. If it gets hairy here, I might have to go to Magee all alone.*

Not a very nice thought.
Not a very nice thought at all.

...

Billee came bouncing up the slope in the late-morning sun, chasing her foreshortened shadow from boulder to boulder. Avery, watching through the bomb-proof window, admired her boundless energy and verve. All the best runners were around that age; good for the Creek, but at what cost? He'd had a *childhood*. Billee was childlike in many ways; but in some ways she'd been an adult since day one. She'd never know, very likely, what she had missed.

He wheeled around and awaited her entrance, which, as usual, came sooner than he could quite anticipate; she stood breathless before him, cheeks red from the climb, her new bow in her right hand, strung. He waited as she caught her wind.

"Want some water?" he asked.

"M'fine." Another series of deep breaths.

"No one chasing you, I take it?"

"Oh! No, I don't think they're thinking about me at all now! They've – whew! – headed east, like you said, and I heard some gunfire –"

"Toward the saddle?"

"– Mm-hmm, but I kept my eye on the house like you said, and there are, I'm *pretty* sure, just two of'em left down there." She grinned. "One's hurt, I *think*, and the other one's Mr. Squinty, who got all bee-stung, and now he's itching a whole lot, haha. Creep."

"Weapons? Gear?"

"He's got my *beautiful* binoculars an' he's looking out for me, but in the same place – not too bright! And s'got Mr. Lawson's lever-action."

"Don't think you were spotted, then?"

"Aww, he's only glassing a little, they've got'm both doing housework – cutting up that awful *meat*, n'running the smoker."

"All right, so time is wasting and I think I see an opportunity here. Get your feet under you and go have some lunch and then, right away, go tell all this, word for word, to Mr. Huskey, he's the whistle of Bledsoe's. Met him?"

She nodded vigorously.

"He'll be right down the west face about a quarter mile from here, waiting for you; he knows what to do. Word to go on is *smart* and the response is *aleck*."

She bolted for the door; then turned halfway with her hand on the jamb, eyes wide.

"Hey, is that about *me*?"

"Only if the shoe fits."

"Huh?"

"Hop!"

"Yessir!" She vanished down the stairs.

Avery wheeled round and faced the console, chuckling. Then he looked down at his stumps.

Shoe, my effing ass.

What I wouldn't do for a good pair of legs right now.

∴

"This is not good," said Emilio Molinero. He and Wilson lowered the half-conscious Allyn to the ground and together they surveyed the scene along the narrow trail. Bodies of people they had known all their lives lay at uncomfortable angles among the blooded sword-ferns beneath the deep shade of the firs. At least four dead could be seen; and also there were people alive, but for how much longer, none could tell. Arrows and bolts had flown, and they had found marks. It had been a rout; no dead and wounded were found from the invading force. Every able-bodied person was already helping someone hurt in the Saddle fight; what could be done for these others? And where were the bandits? Could this be a trap?

"Karen, keep an arrow at the ready, please, and go and find Vernie. He will have come through here and seen the edge of the woods; we need to know what is ahead." Emilio turned to Wilson. "Let us find all the wounded; and if they can be brought to the trail, we shall do what we can for them here; and see if we can get a runner to Hall for help and perhaps some people from Chaney's."

As Karen set down the things she had been carrying, except for her bow and quiver, she could hear Wilson's reply. "Yes; we would either need oxcarts for all these, or stretcher relays."

Karen, who, like most of the others, had slept little in the last two days and nights, was beginning to get tunnel vision from exhaustion, but she maintained her scan of her surroundings as she ran down the trail. She passed a Creeker with a bolt in his back, whose breath made bubbles as he crawled. Was this Vernie? No. She knelt down and said, "Rest. Rest, now; you're only hurting yourself, and help is coming." And ran on.

The edge of the woods was not far away; sunlight was brighter ahead already. The Ellers, Reymers, and Peachers, who would have been ten or eleven in number, had only just begun their hike when the bandits came down upon them in the fog. Ahead, kneeling by the trunk of a mid-sized maple tree, she could see Vernie. Without turning his head, he extended his left hand, palm down, and signaled her to slow down and approach with stealth. She did so. After what seemed an eternity, she came up on his right. The heavy rifle lay ready to hand, leaning against the mossy tree trunk between them.

In the distance a cow, clearly in great distress, was bellowing.

"We got trouble," Vernie said softly.

"Are they at Wilsons'?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"And that's Florence, yelling, over at Ames!"

"Yes, she hasn't been milked this morning. Mrs. Ames hears about this, she's likely t'kill the bandits *herself*. All the animals in upper Creek are hurting or hungry; this cruelty touches us all in so many ways."

Karen knew he was also worrying about Tomma; no one could be certain to recover from deep wounds these days.

The farm buildings could be seen from here; a two-story white house, with the two big redwoods behind it, and several small outbuildings. These did not look like log buildings, such as those at Ames; but they had been reinforced with very thick layers of planking. Even a ball from the Hawken was not guaranteed to go through that. Near the main house was a watch-tower of the same kind as the one at Ames; it had been a creosoted light pole at one time; the useless mercury vapor lamp had been hauled down and salvaged, and in its place was a tiny structure like a tree house. Access would be via rope ladder and trap-door; and the ladder was missing.

Karen produced her monocular and handed it to Vernie. He'd seen it before, two months ago when they'd had to examine her belongings; but he was unfamiliar with the workings of such a thing except by hearsay. Karen understood; she took it back, looked through it for a second to demonstrate which end was which, and handed it to him again, uncapped.

"Ah!" he said. "Very nice. Mm-hmm, someone's on the second floor. In the crow's nest, too."

"How do we get the wounded up to the road?"

"The only way would be to go up the right-hand side of the hedge, ford the Creek, and go to Ames Farm, if the bandits are not already there. Then over to Jones along the back fences. If someone goes to get help, the help should come to Jones'. Carefully, of course, in case these bandits go there as well. But I think they are stopping at Wilsons' and thinking. 'What do we do now?'" Vernie grinned mirthlessly. "They have bitten off a very large mouthful to chew."

"I could do all that."

"Yes, you may be our swiftest. But you are not rested. No more am I, or most of us. But the Ridge crew is fresh. Go back and tell the others what you've seen here; they'll do what seems best to them."

"K; keep the glass on them."

"I will do that; thanks."

Karen returned up the trail to the first switchback; the two crew leaders were standing there with Errol and a couple of Ridge crew,

over the body of the man she'd spoken to. He had apparently already died. She gave her report; Wilson turned to Emilio and put his hand on his shoulder. "How about you all try to lie down and take a bite and a nap; Minnie here knows her way to the Hall trail from this one without coming out of the woods. She can get us help for the wounded over to Jones', and some kind of army up to there to see about these effers at Wilsons'.

"We will do so. There is very little strength in most of us now. Will you be forming a line?"

"Yes, as usual, it's the best we can do. There's cover here, but not between here and the house. If they make up their mind they're screwed and try to come back through here, we'll whistle you up; and then we'll want to get as many of them as we can." He patted the Ruger Old Army on his hip for emphasis.

Emilio looked round. "Thirteen of us dead already; here and above. Soon may be we will not have so many wounded to carry to Jones'."

Wilson turned and spoke with Minnie, who, as she listened, nodding, shrugged out of her blanket roll and added it to the supply depot that had been made, just off the trail among the ferns. She ran off to the west presently, dodging through the thick hazels and underbrush. Errol handed the Lyman rifle and its pouch to one of the Ridge crew, and bent down to pick up his and Karen's blanket rolls and his bow and axe. Karen collected her blanket roll from Errol, and, with him, walked a short way from the trail and lay down to rest, with the intention of sitting up presently for some cold potatoes and bean cake.

From across the valley, Florence's frightened and urgent calls echoed against the hills. *So sorry, baby. Nothing we can do for you right now*, thought Karen, with her eyes closed. In almost no time she was asleep. Errol unrolled her blanket and covered her.

∴

Ellen's little army had grown to some twenty-two. There was not much experience among them, and, except for the newly appointed grenadiers – one of whom had already dropped and cracked his bomb and was in disgrace with his friends – severely underequipped. Fortunately every able-bodied Creeker had trained in selfbows from earliest childhood; these would have to do.

They were arriving at Beemans. Up the hill, sheep were bunched against a fence, stricken with fear; two coyotes stood in the middle of the pasture, tearing at a ewe they had downed. One lad, a Beeman, turned, distressed, to Ellen on her tall horse.

"Permission to go shoot at the 'yotes, ma'am?"

Ellen looked up at the house. Her point man had already checked it

out and was waving the "all clear." "Are you sure of recovering your arrows?"

"Yes'm, I'll have a full set for the bandits!"

"I like your style; sure, have a go, but take one of your friends with you to watch all round; salvage the ewe, too, then both of you back to the house pronto."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Ellen turned into the yard and was, at first, bemused as to how to get her sore body down from the Percheron-mix farm horse. At last she simply urged him up against the porch and slid off. She sat down heavily on the top step, wheezing, with the bagged Navy revolver by her side.

"Who here is all about horses?"

"Me!" called several simultaneously, waving hands.

Like a class of school kids in days long gone, she thought wistfully.

"All right, you and you, give our friend here some rest from his bit, find him some grain and water and something to curry him. He's been very sweet. Whoa, don't go yet. You, and you, investigate the kitchen and do something for the rest of us, but no fires just yet. You, you look like a climber with sharp eyes. Yes? 'K, go up to the crow's nest and check out the farms east of us. Anything you see, tell it to – you, go with him and wait at the bottom of the pole, anything he tells you, come tell me. Don't shout it out. You two –" she pointed – "stay by the road, same deal, but with arrows nocked. Rest of you, find cover in a circle around the house, fifty paces or so out, ten to twenty apart. Mr. Deela, take the whistle, please. Any part of the perimeter gets into an altercation, run towards the action, blowing as your go. Rest of you hear the whistle, put some of your attention thataways, 'case they break into your rear, but don't move unless we come get you. They could fake us out. 'K, all? I'm going to have to lie down a bit."

"You look flushed, ma'am," remarked Deela. "May we look for something to bring down fever?"

"Bless you," she replied, lying down on the porch and rolling herself in the red wool blanket on which she'd ridden the horse. "Put the kitchen kids on it, please, but then be thinking about that periphery." She closed her eyes.

∴

"Hello, Carey. You're looking like shit."

"I'm feeling like compost." Murchison, telephone handset in hand, looked up at Tom Chaney in the dim light from the alcohol lamp.

"Apropos. Have you seen a runaway patient of mine?"

"Yep, she's stolen a horse, pulled together a ragtag children's crusade, and headed after the bandits out toward Ames'."

"My god, Carey, she doesn't plan to outlive you, does she?" It was more a statement than a question.

"It's her call. I think she's right, too. If I didn't have to keep tabs on Ridge, I'd be there with her."

"What's happening up top?"

"Well, the Bledsoes and company have gone after a rear guard that's camping in Lawson's house. Scorched earth. Avery says he sees the smoke already. From there, they'll try to hook up with Wilson and the little Saddle army over to the Ames end."

"That was always our weak spot."

"Mm. Should have done more about it. Permanent dugout with phone should have been farther down the south slope. Hindsight. Never would have had 'nough diggers anyway, though."

Elsa Chaney, in high dudgeon, strode through the doorway.

"Where's Ellen got off to?"

"Well out of reach for now, dear," replied Tom.

Captain Murchison set down the handset. "Haven't you got enough patients without her?"

"They're all as settled as they're going to be. Mrs. Lazar, Velma, and some others are on it now. I want to find Ellen and get her back in care, or she's not going to last the week!"

Murchison slammed his hand, palm down, on the table. "*Nobody* around here is going to last the week if we don't contain the incursion up the Creek! And furthermore," he said, turning and pointing to the handset, "as I was about to tell your man here, there's maybe worse brewing."

"Worse?" asked Tom.

"The kids have rigged a radio up at Ridge. Using the doorbell circuit. It's patched in to the phone, and I've been listening. *Magee's* back. Probably less than two hundred miles from here. These skinheads may be acting on their own, but I have a feeling he's looking for them."

"Oh, Jeeah-help," said Elsa quietly.

"Yeah," answered Murchison. "And anybody else up there that wants to lend a hand."

∴

Karen opened her eyes. As usual she was disoriented, plus her eyelashes seemed gunky. Shadows had moved a bit, and were much fainter: more clouds moving in. Midday already?

She found she was wrapped in her blanket, which was damp beneath her but a help. Someone was back-to-back with her in another blanket. Sitting up, she found that it was Errol, out cold.

Crawling out of the blanket, stiff and chilled, Karen found the roll-bag had been placed by her head. She sipped some water from her

bottle, an old gray Nalgene, and gnawed some equally tasteless bean cake. No one else around? No, there were bodies stretched out near the trail, in two rows beneath the autumn-bright red foliage of some viney maples. Something about those on the left suggested they were alive.

Standing up, Karen scanned the surrounding woods. What had wakened her was a muffled chopping sound; a work crew was uphill, cutting up wild hazel poles and fashioning stretchers with blankets that had belonged to the dead. She moved to the row of wounded and found Tomma and Allyn among them.

"Hiya," said Tomma. He didn't raise his head.

"How are you?"

"Starting to feel like shit."

"Think they muck on their bolts or something?"

"Wouldn't put it past them; but this was a bullet. Errol poured in some alky, both holes; I'll live. I'm considered walking wounded, Emilio says." He smiled wanly.

"Want some water?"

"Sure do."

She handed him her bottle for a long swig.

From Tomma, she moved to Allyn. His presence had faded, she realized with a shock. Just from arm wounds! And, she reminded herself, from being carried round on a mountain with bones shredding muscle. At home she had studied physiology, advanced first aid, and diagnostic triage. But Father had directed her studies toward self-care, and it had been mostly theoretical. Faced with so much destruction, she felt ignorant and helpless. The others seemed even more at sea than she.

She looked at his long face, with the trim black beard. This gentle man, whose hands held valuable knowledge of grafting and pruning, should not have been mangled so – if he lived, he might well be a double amputee, not something she'd seen a lot of. He might not *want* to live. She was not sure *she* would, in like case.

She pulled his blanket up to his chin. He'd 'liked' her, in that way that was supposed to mean eventual marriage among these people. She'd not known how to respond to him. Now, she would very likely not know where this particular story would have gone.

Allyn's eyes opened. He turned his head slowly, and, recognizing her, cracked a crooked smile.

"Ah, the wild Amazon."

"Shh. Rest."

"Pooh. They get me out of here, I'll end up even unhappier than I am now. Really, though, I'm for the heaps at Hall Common, yes?"

He was sweating profusely in the chill air. She found a bit of cloth among his few bedroll things and patted down his forehead. "I think

you should think about apples, plums, pears, apricots, cherries, and filberts, and walnuts – and, umm, quinces. They'll need you."

"Hmm. You're politic, and I thank you for that. Water?"

"Right here." She tipped his head up a little and dribbled in a mouthful.

Wilson Wilson stopped by. "K, we got enough poles for all the stretcher cases, and a party is making up to gather up your friends here and and go hedge-hopping. You're Karen, Ames, right?"

She nodded.

"Emilio says you should stick with my group and keep an eye on Wilson Farm. I grew up there; so you and I know the place better than anyone that's on their feet here. S'good?"

"Yes. Oh – there's this freshened cow at Ames' –"

"Yes, *everybody* hears her. Emilio says if they don't run into bandits there, he'll see she's helped or put out of her misery. S'maybe gone on too long to do anything for, by now."

And so the disaster spreads. We're our own little Freeway Corridor here. Is it like this everywhere? She looked down at Allyn. His eyes had gone out of focus again, but he'd been listening.

"Go back t'work, girl," he whispered. "Sic'm."

∴

"Wolf, that cow has quit hollerin' all of a sudden. Think somebody's maybe up there?" the scout asked.

"Oh, I don't doubt it. No, don't investigate. We mostly oughta stick together for awhile. Just go back 'n keep an eye on th' road."

"Wolf."

"Gilroy."

Wolf sat in the easy chair and leaned back. He closed his eyes, briefly – then began listening to, and scanning, his surroundings again, with his AK on his knees. He'd assumed someone would have made contact by now: this place was valuable. The snivelly female they'd captured wasn't much help, though. His hope that they'd try to ransom or rescue her, or for that matter this apple farm, was fading. A person of relatively little importance, a dishwasher sort from a farm called 'Lazar.' Hmm. Jews alive? Not that he cared one way or the other, himself; but some, if *they* were still alive, would give a lot for the information.

And he'd learned this place was 'Wilson.' Not much information in that! Kind of hierarchical households, but a decentralized community. Apt to do things piecemeal, which explained why they'd met such a small force on the hill, ditto the reinforcements. Also, she didn't seem to know a thing about the 'Dept. of Defense' business, up on the hilltop. Could never have faked that blank look. Such leadership as

existed here was proving both cagey and shadowy. Maybe they were ex-military? But so much "left-hand-not-knowing-what-the-right-hand-does" seemed amateur in the extreme.

Why, some of these people might not even know we're here! Might have to force the issue.

"Hey! Coug!"

"Wolf?" Cougar's annoyingly appealing face popped round the door jamb.

"Way too quiet 'round here."

"It is that, Wolf."

"Seen anythin' outside we could set fire to?"

"Well, Wolf, we need all the little huts on the perimeter —"

"*I'm* the one said that; what *don't* we need?"

"Well, there's a little building, no walls, full of hay at one end.

Couple of big animals were in there; we're having them for supper."

"Oh, yeah. Well, have 'em light that off. 'N then take th' girl up into th' lookout 'n make her scream a little bit. No harm tryin'. I jus' wanna ring somebody up to talk to, s'all. That don't work, we'll recon in force 'n set fire to th' places we c'n see from here."

"Wolf."

"Coug."

∴

"Ma'am, brought you some tea."

Ellen awoke, woozy, her head pounding. "Unh, wouldn't mind so much if this was a hangover. Help me up, dear. I'm stiff as a board."

Ro-eena complied, then offered a mug.

Ellen sniffed. Her eyes widened. "Oh. ... Oh! *Real* tea?"

"Mmm-hmm, the Beemans found a bush here; a Russian variety of *sinensis*. Grows this far north, ma'am. And Mr. Allyn, I think I've heard, has begun propagating it at Wilsons'."

Ellen sipped. "With *honey*. Also hard to come by these days. And ... ?" She wrinkled her nose.

"We ground up some ginger root."

"Well ... well, I guess I need it. So, anything new and exciting going on?" She looked around her; nothing seemed out of place. A country farm hedge and gate; two young people with bows watching the road. Leaves falling peaceably, by ones and twos, from fruit trees.

"The lookout says there's another party approaching from the west; that they're definitely ours; that somebody has quieted the cow that was screaming, up at Ames. And he thinks there's someone at Wilson's but doesn't know who."

"I'm guessing those are our guests. Might be them at Ames', too. Well, let's get me up and see if I can belt on this gosh-awfully heavy revolver. Where's Deela with that whistle?"

"Shouldn't you eat first, ma'am?"

"That I can do standing up. What have you got?"

"Oatmeal with some herb oil and dried veggie leaves, ma'am."

Ellen's eyebrows shot up. "No one laid a *fire*, did they?"

"No'm, it was sunny for awhile and we did some up in a solar oven; also we've ground up quite a lot of grains and are soaking them. With apples and pears, sliced. The oats are not very appealing, ma'am, but we *are* a crowd here."

"Good job. And now I think I hear horses."

Through the remaining leaves of the apple and plum trees along the road, they could see another small army approaching with bows, cross-bows, bush-hooks, and even a pitchfork. At its head rode Dr. and Mrs. Chaney. Deela appeared at Ellen's elbow, hung the whistle cord around Ellen's neck, and offered her a steaming bowl and a spoon. She set down her tea on the porch table and ate, as the small cavalcade approached the driveway. One of the sentries looked up the walk to her, worried.

"Do we have a password, ma'am?"

"Not likely," called out Tom Chaney. "We're here on our own recognizance. May we advance and be *recognized*?" he grinned.

"Comedian. Come on in and let's sort ourselves out," replied Ellen, with her mouth full. "Who all you got?"

"Some Maggies, Delsmans, Tomlinsons, and Hall. Ten, besides ourselves."

Ellen did the math. "I make that thirty-two in all. We should make a roster; if there were a melee right now, we wouldn't be able to know who's gone missing."

"I'll start on that, if you like." Carl Perkins, from Tomlinson's, stepped forward with his bow.

"Do you read and write?" asked Tom.

"Mm-hmm, wouldn't if I'd grown up *here*, now would I?"

"Touché." They smiled at each other; Tom fished out an old Tatum clipboard from his medical saddlebag and handed it to Carl.

Elsa dismounted, gave her reins to Ro-eena, who'd run down to take them, and came up the steps. She looked down at Ellen. "You ... you runaway, you." But she seemed to mean it half as a compliment.

Good thing, too. There have been times I have not liked this do-gooder, thought Ellen. "Want some tea?"

"Got something besides peppermint?"

Ellen picked up the mug from the table and waved it under Elsa's nose. Mrs. Chaney's eyes widened. "*Tea!* Oh, of course. Beemans' tea!"

"Coming right up," said Deela, as he went by.

Tom joined them. "Ellen, we're straight here from Carey, who's in reasonably good shape, and says Avery's doing well, too. He wants us

to look you over and change that wound dressing."

"Why wouldn't Avery be doing well?" asked Ellen, absent-mindedly raising her jerkin to reveal a sour-looking bandage, right above the holstered Navy, with a red spot near one edge. Elsa went to work, shaking her head.

"His crew have gone to help the young people that went up to the saddle yesterday," said Tom, "and he's also directing an assault on the bandits' lines of communication. See that smoke beyond the saddle?"

"Oh. Lawsons'."

The lookout said something to the young man at the foot of the crow's nest, who called up to the house.

"Ma'am, there's a fire over at Wilsons'." All eyes looked lower. More smoke – much more smoke – dark gray shot through with black, somber and sullen, began belling into the sky. It was in the same direction as the saddle, but much closer. The elders remembered that cloud shape.

"What building is it? Can you tell?" Ellen called out.

"No. It's not the house, though."

She turned to Tom, with Elsa following her around in a half-circle, muttering. "A provocation. It's their way of saying hello."

"Maybe we could parley? Find out what they *want*?" Elsa asked, who stood back with her arms round herself.

Ellen's eyes flashed. "What they want, I think they made *very* clear out at the Eagle's Nest. And they haven't changed their note since."

"I'm sorry, Ellen. But –"

"Elsa?" Tom put his arm round her. "Maybe someday, we'll have some sanity around us again. Meanwhile, those men down there have *eaten* the Lawsons."

"Do we *know* that?"

"Yes, dear ... we do."

The lookout talked to the caller, who cupped his hands around his mouth. "There's another horse coming."

"That would be the runner from Murch," noted Ellen. "Unless there's some other horse we don't know about."

The caller was listening to the lookout. He turned and cupped his hands again. "And there's someone coming over from Jones Farm."

"How many?" asked Tom.

The caller relayed and waited, then passed on the response. "One. Has hair, wearing a jerkin."

"One of ours," remarked Tom to Elsa and Ellen. "Looks like everything is happening at once."

∴

Karen watched the stamping shed go up in flames. Steam from the

loosely-piled haystack began to whiten the smoke, which ran along the ground to the east, masking the east orchard, the Creek, Ames Farm, and the blue hills beyond. From across the fields, she could hear, faintly, a woman's screams, repeated at intervals.

Without taking her eyes away from the ground ahead, she spoke to Wilson, hidden among the maples to her right. "We could use that smoke, get right in among them unseen."

"And attempt a rescue? That's what they *want*. No, Karen, Marcee's as good as dead to us now. No sense joining her."

"I understood that, I think. But if we went part way, in the dead ground, then we could be in a useful position to exploit opportunities."

"Mmh. That's good thinking; but we're in small numbers here. If pressed from the west, they may come out of that smoke this way, and from here is our best shot at them – concentrated fire from concealment."

"Sir, it's a war of attrition. They can afford casualties less than we can. I would like to go see if I can cause some confusion. They wouldn't expect just one."

Wilson moved closer, and peered at Karen from among the ferns and brambles.

"I appreciate your enthusiasm, but –what's in it for you? ... if I may ask."

She glanced over, then straight ahead, . "This valley is the – it's everyone's chance, around here, to start over. But not if it gets pushed over the edge. You're losing people, hay, grain, animals, structures, and capabilities, with a winter coming in. Whatever Allyn knows, whatever Mo-reen knew, all of the dead or dying – it's vanishing."

"True, but, again, we'll need firepower right here."

"You saw what happened at the saddle, and on the trail behind us. I think the same happened at Ball Butte. You are all soldiers, but these bandits aren't bandits – they're some kind of *commando*. They will hit one place in the line, together, and most of them will escape."

"So, we fight them, we get most of them, but if any get through, they may bring others back in larger numbers?"

"Yes. In order for the Creek to survive you must kill them to the last man. If, say fourteen of them hit you here instead of twenty, you have a better chance of doing this."

"Again. What's in it for you? You know you won't live."

Karen resumed watching the smoke and the fields, but also watched Wilson peripherally.

"I grew up underground – you know the story?" He nodded. "My father's room was the only approach to mine. Anyone who might try to take me had to go through him. It cost him his life – but it *worked*. I was worth that. The *Creek* is worth that."

"She's right." They turned. Huskey, from Bledsoe Farm, was

standing up the hill from them. He'd approached almost soundlessly through the undergrowth, and overheard the tail end of their exchange. "Sorry we don't have a current password; only one I've got is 'smart' with the reply 'aleck.'"

Wilson was overjoyed. "Huskey! How many of you are there?"

"Oh, we're four; been beating up country in your direction and that posse out there –" he pointed at Wilson Farm with a lever-action carbine – "is down by two."

"That's more than a little encouraging." Wilson returned his attention to Karen. "Let's talk about your idea. Details?"

∴

"K, folks, council of war time, seeing as we're all here." Ellen Murchison looked round the room. She, the Chaney's, Emilio Molinero, and Guchi Yamaguchi, the young substitute runner for Hall, had moved indoors to escape the chilly afternoon weather. Everyone was having cold oatmeal with fruit and solar tea of one kind or another; as were the warriors who'd remained out-of-doors.

She'd found a large sheet of scrap paper, an old soil survey map of what had been an adjacent county. Spreading this, upside down, on the dining room table, she picked up a tiny watercolor brush, made from some Beeman farmer's hair, and dipped it in a jelly glass of charcoal water. She drew the brush along the paper in a wavy line, lengthwise, then dipped the brush again.

"This is the Creek. And this is the road, running along the north bank of the Creek." She dipped and painted rapidly, as everyone craned their necks to see. "Here we have Maggie's Hill and the Butte on the north, the Ridge on the south, with the saddle here, and all off to here is the Cascades." She waved the brush at the *terra incognita* on the right. Heads nodded.

She dipped the brush and dotted along both sides of the creek and road. "K, here's all the farms, starting with Hall and Murchison across from each other on the west and Ames and Wilson ditto on the east. Wilson is occupied by that ugly-faced horde." She made an "X" on the dot representing the orchard farm, then looked to Emilio.

He nodded. "Yes. They have had casualties. We think they are down by a third of their original number, with at least two wounded. They have two rapid-fire weapons, experience, and enterprising leadership. But their reasoning in being here seems to me obscure."

"I'm guessing they had sort of no choice," put in Tom Chaney. "Our scorched earth policy in the approaches to the west has been effective until now, but we may not have anticipated that such a large and determined group would penetrate this far across the flood plains –

they had no way to go back, only forward."

"Good a guess as any," said Ellen. "So, we have a little over thirty of us here, with some grenades and Molotovs, and a revolver." She dipped another small brush in blackberry-elderberry juice for a different color, and drew a circle around Beemans. "Twelve at Ames, or, really, en route to Jones, with six badly hurt people on stretchers." She drew an arrow between Ames and Jones.

Tom's brow furrowed. "Elsa and I should be on our way there right now. With one or two fresh volunteers."

"May I recommend?" asked Ellen. Tom raised his eyebrows, expressing assent. "You'll be too exposed at Jones' and with insufficient protection. They get wind of you, they're apt to come across the Creek and double-tap the lot of you. I know your people are pretty much exhausted by now," she turned to Emilio. "But if we can get everyone to here, they'll be 'inside the lines,' as we used to say, with a better kitchen, more medical supplies, rested personnel to lend a hand, and a chance to bring the stretcher bearers back up to speed and back into the action."

"This is good," said Emilio, rising. "I should go back right away and bring them."

"You look pretty all-in yourself. How's about we send the runner?"

Guchi nodded. "I can go on the pony; it will be faster, and I'm supposed to see all I can for the Captain anyway. With your permission?"

"Go; and thanks for your report. Stick to the north of the hedges, and stay low and quiet, 'K?'" Guchi, who'd remained standing, nodded, raised his hand in farewell and strode to the door.

"Nice kid. Now, according to him, the western group that's been watching the Bridge has been turned loose to pitch in for us; they've captured and burned Lawson's and are heading for here." She drew a circle around the trailhead behind Wilson's. "Guchi says a runner came in from there, who asked us to go to your aid at Jones'. That turned out to be redundant, but who knew?" she grinned.

Elsa watched her. *Quite a performance, girl; I happen to know your fever is about a hundred and three by now; how long can you keep this up?* But she held this to herself.

"So, she's on her way back there with a few, a very few reinforcements. And now I think the bottom of our barrel has been scraped. How many people are down there at present, and what have they got?" she asked Emilio.

"I no longer know, ma'am, but there should be more than ten. We have, also, there and on the summit, at least thirteen dead of our own and three of theirs."

"We're going to become aware of that at some point; it will be a sad and hard winter no matter how this goes. But those will have to wait

awhile. What 's the armament picture over there?"

"There is a revolver, with I do not know how much ammunition. Two muzzle-loading rifles and about forty balls and powder, and many more bows, crossbows and hand weapons than people to wield them."

"So they have the back exit reasonably plugged, but they're well outnumbered. We also have no way to co-ordinate with them. Folks, I have to admit this looks iffy to me; they're tired, we're tired, it's getting colder and wetter out, and somebody is going to start making mistakes. We're wide open in all directions except the saddle and right here at Beemans'. They take it in their heads to try just about anything but stay put or come after us here, they'll get away with it.

"So." She put down the brush, and picked up her tea, sipping it to put off the advent of laryngitis. "In the time-honored tradition of Council and GM, the table is now open to suggestions."

Elsa pointed to Holyrood Farm on Ellen's map. "If they go on a burning campaign, it would make sense to them to go this way. No one is there; and they could destroy four places in a row unopposed. That's, that's a fourth of our resources right there."

"But destruction may not be the primary consideration," objected Mr. Molinero. "The burning building at Wilson's is only one; I think it may be a challenge only, to come and have it out, so to speak."

"I think so, too," Ellen agreed. "Tom?"

"I think if we sit tight, they will come look for us, and in some way for which we, as the less imaginative side, will be unprepared. The semiautomatic weapons give them advantages in this mixed terrain."

"That's so; what would you do?"

"Well, I'm a *medic*; I'm distracted by all the hurt that's coming at me from Jones'. And I hate to propose something that will likely cost us even more. But I think if I were *you*, I'd get someone over to Wilson Wilson with a proposal for a coordinated attack on their position at night, first with the grenades, and then at close quarters, hand-to-hand. We ought to have better odds in the dark on our own ground."

"Yes! I think so, too. If these men realized just how stretched-out we are, and had any kind of an idea where to go, they could, right now, burn their way all the way to Hall and march up the Ridge, practically without a fight. Even if we could keep up with them, they'd be able to hold us off in daylight the whole way there."

"And then it would be over."

"For the Creek, yes. But, Tom and Elsa, you both know, and Emilio here might as well know, it could potentially make matters much, much worse."

She looked around at the three of them. "For Murch and me, this is priority one: these tattooed yahoos must *not* see the installation on Starvation Ridge. We move against them after dark. Tonight. Agreed?"

∴

Mary Savage, Ph.D., was getting bored. *It's all well making slow fuses and stuffing bottles*, she thought, *but making primers would be more fun, and we just don't have the micro capability*. Also, with more than half her people run off to play hero, she couldn't even get more powder done; no one to run around scraping up the delightfully evil ingredients. And there seemed to be hardly anything in the kitchen; she'd looked, and had had to make do with the damned eternal oatmeal, cold.

This here rheumatoid arthritis is the bitch.

"Selk! Selk! You around here anywheres?" She thought she heard something respond to that; like a squirrel backing itself out of a nest. Presently the back door banged, and feet came pattering down the hall.

"Yo?" Selk peered at her through the thick glasses.

"Yo," he says. You pick up all my worst archaisms. Listen, most everybody here is gone to try and win themselves some medals; who have I got here besides you?"

"Mmm ... well, there's Ollie; he's still making Molotovs. With rag fuses; we're out of the good stuff, and powder, too."

"How many has he got?"

"About three by now, I think. The trick is to find anything that will burn right. And all the matches – and the matchmaker – went with Mrs. Murchison, anyway."

"Well, tell him to leave off. I need transportation, and you two are it. Are there any wheelchairs in inventory?"

"There's the medical one that came over from Chaney for repairs – big heavy thing. Folds flat. The brakes wouldn't set."

"Right, the ugly gray vinyl thing. Well, never mind the brakes; let's deliver it as-is to Hall, with me in it."

"Umm, you want to go to the Mess Hall?"

"What's with the eyebrows? I'm even less mobile than I let on; I want to chew the fat with Murchison, who is not likely to be enticed *here* from *there* just now; and the alternative is a garden cart, assuming we can find one. Or do you think you can rig up an extension for that godawful phone system of his?"

"Not enough good wire handy, no dynamic handsets."

"Chair it is, then. Fetch!"

∴

Wolf walked out to the crow's nest and tipped back his head. "Give it up, Coug. They ain't comin'."

"Wolf. 'K, girl, ya justgot a reprieve; climb down th' ladder, slow-like."

"I can't *move*." Derisive hoots came from the two nearest blockhouses; from where Wolf was standing, the female sounded, to him, too, more petulant than hurt. *But that might be a matter of perspective*, he realized. *The human animal is a mysterious thing*.

"Sure, y'can. Seven more fingernails says y'can go down that ladder even faster than y'came up."

She complied. Wolf held her by the wrist as Cougar came down. By now there was not much fight left in the little redhead; but unnecessary complications were always best avoided.

"Swap weapons, Coug, and lock her in the outhouse; I'm going up and look around fer a minute."

Sure thing, Wolf."

"Coug."

As they left, Wolf could hear her: "Water? Water?" – and Cougar's reply. More guffaws from the blockhouses. He'd have to make the rounds and sharpen them up again soon – they all had poontang on the brain.

Wolf popped the magazine and counted rounds, snapped it back into the magazine well, tucked the pistol into his belt, and set his hands and feet to the skinny little ladder. It was one of those household fire-escape things, with two parallel chains and the narrow PVC pipe treads, with cable threaded through them. The treads were cracking with age, and climbing took more concentration than he'd realized. He wondered if he'd find it hard going to get through the little hole in the crow's nest floor, but the Wilson farmers had thoughtfully run the ladder right up to the ceiling.

There were four windows, open to the elements; each ran the length of a wall and was about eight inches high. The walls, only four feet high, were made of stacked four-by-fours; decent cover with a good view. From the north window, Wolf saw that two hulking redwoods blocked much of the view, across the roof of the big house from the crow's nest. But he could make out three large frame houses through a skein of cottonwoods and ashes along a small river; none of the chimneys were smoking. The valley's road was across the river as well, and seemed to be mostly lined with fruit trees and grapevines. Two of the houses were two stories high, like the one in hand, and all were whitewashed; they all had outbuildings and barns and were spaced about half a klick apart. Things were closer together than he'd realized; but there were impedimenta in all directions.

On the one hand, not too cleverly, the farmers had re-roofed the old houses in cedar. An attack with torches would be definitive. On the other, there were fences everywhere; the few gaps in vegetation showed that they were made of barbed wire, and taller than the abandoned barbed-wire farm fences elsewhere. And the gaps were few. A deliberate effort had been made to hide the fences in an

impenetrable thorny growth, six to eight feet thick. By leaving a few archers at each gate, the locals could hold up an advance in any direction long enough to get reinforcements. But perhaps they hadn't thought much about that. It might have more to do with limiting the escape of stock and/or crop predation by deer.

The quick way to get around would be that road. So it was probably well defended somewhere off to the left; perhaps at that third house. Wolf dug out his 4X rifle scope, uncapped it, and gazed in that direction. Uh-huh, a lookout just like this one. And occupied! Why hadn't they sent out skirmishers when his men had torched the building? They should be frantic at losing this stuff. He swung to check out the other two places. Didn't look like there was anyone home. The noisy cow had been turned out, though, and was grazing on a rise between the house on the right and a very large barn toward the long, low hill in the background. Someone has been there this morning, very likely. Maybe some of that bunch they'd punched through getting to here.

Why hadn't they driven off the animals and emptied the larders? Maybe they'd put off decamping until the last minute – put a lot of faith in the defenders on the hill.

He lowered the scope, swung around, and scanned the "south forty." Near at hand on the right, the cowshed was still pumping out prodigious amounts of gray smoke, which drifted left across his field of view. But the woods stretched across the entire scene, from the mountains at left to the big ridge, covered with timber on this side, on the right. Whatever was up there could not be seen from here, or, no doubt, vice versa. It would have to be investigated from up close, if at all. Raising the scope, he glassed along the edge of the woods between the billows of smoke. Nothing to be seen, but he felt watched. There couldn't more than a dozen farmers over there as yet. Might be worth sending a sortie against them; perhaps at night?

A look to the east was unproductive; pastures and woodlands, and taller and taller mountains that way. It would all be wilderness, and for his purposes impenetrable. There is never as much game under such a thick canopy as there is in open country; his crew would starve if they tried a breakout in that direction. Heck, they could starve anywhere but here.

Wolf one-eightied on the small bench and peered west. Two farms, both of which seemed evacuated, could be seen that way, nestled against the big ridge. He was not a farmer himself, but he sensed the mountain's shade would limit productivity of long-season crops. He expected to see mostly pastures and hayfields, and that was what he saw; with sheep. There were fewer fences, fewer gates. The farmers would not, he felt sure, have had the time or manpower to close off this route. With the cable cutters out front and the Glock and the AK

in the rear, a sortie in this direction could be productive. His archers could burn some buildings, and with any luck provoke the yokels into charging across those bridges, so that they could be picked off.

He heard someone messing about at the bottom of the light pole. Drawing the Glock and keeping it ready but out of sight, Wolf looked down through the trapdoor opening. It was Cougar, back from the outhouse, AK in hand.

"Coug."

"Wolf."

"Swap back. I've filled the mag for ya; put together a quick little expedition. Four men and a can of alkie; an' break out th' Bics."

∴

The wounded had arrived, and the medical team had swung into action. Ellen, realizing sadly she had taken herself to the limit, was going to be one of the patients.

Once again using the crutch, she gathered her forces for a short lecture. They were all tying on armbands of old white linen for quick identification in a night fight. She'd explain to the grenadiers in detail what must be done; then describe to everyone how they would ford the creek, using the dark shapes of the two skyline redwoods to find their way into the inner grounds of Wilson's; tell them about ignoring pain; about closing fast and striking home, first with their arrows in the firelight, then bush hooks and swords; knives last. Incapacitate whomever is right in front of you before running to a whistle. Three long blasts would be to retreat across the Creek and fall back on Beemans', with a rear guard. Emilio would take the old Navy, all six chambers charged, and lead. What was she forgetting? There was always something. They all looked up at her on the top step of the porch, expectant and trusting.

But suddenly they all seemed distracted. There were gunshots across the Creek, through the cottonwoods below. Something went *boom*, and echoed against the hills. A grenade? Dynamite?

The lookout came to his west window and shouted down to the house. "There's a fight!"

"We know that, *where?*" croaked Ellen.

"It's down by th' burning shed! There's some running around going on, too!"

Ellen backed up to the chair by the porch table and sat down. *Oh, shit! Who's doing what to whom, and why now?*

Wilson, quite apparently, had not gotten Ellen's message.

"Emilio!"

"Ma'am?"

"Take over here, please. Give 'em a quick refresher on cover and

concealment, run 'em across the creek out of sight of the bridge, over by the west hedge – cover the crossing with the revolver – and watch for an opportunity. Stick together. If Wilson's bunch has them engaged, one Molotov into the main house might be all we need."

Neither spoke of the obvious – as a daylight scenario, it could be costly.

Cost would be measured in friends and neighbors.

∴

Karen alternately crept and shuffled, crouching, along the eastern hedge of Holyrood Farm. Her sandaled and stockinged feet were damp; a misty rain was beginning to fall on the barley stubble of the field. Ahead of her, across the cottonwoods along Starvation Creek, she could see the late afternoon clouds dragging their ragged skirts through the firs on Maggie's Hill. In her left hand she carried her longbow. Across her back she carried a borrowed quiver of better make than hers, with a side pocket containing a small water bottle, some bean cake, and a few possibles. She checked, for the fortieth time, the long cedar arrow, tipped with a broadhead pounded from a stainless-steel washer, nocked to the waxed string of her bow. At her belt was one of the smaller of the Savage Mary short swords and her skinning knife. In an inside pocket of her leather jerkin, stitched into place, rested a holster made from a pre-Undoing Tyvek/bubble-pack envelope, which she'd gladly received from Mrs. Ames. In it rode the tiny pistol. With any luck, her sealed primers were still good. There was no testing them; in all the world, so far as she knew, there were only thirteen rounds left in her caliber, and all of them were on her person.

"Hold up!" whispered Huskey, behind her. She stopped and looked back briefly; he carried the Winchester, which he'd explained had belonged to Mr. Lawson, and in a holster on his right hip, the Ruger BP revolver with which Avery Murchison had entrusted him, along with a half-size crossbow slung on his back, bolt-loaded and cocked. On the left side of his belt, he carried another of the swords. In a pouch, he kept food and water, and a jar of alcohol and bear fat, brought from Lawson's, in case they found an opportunity to fire the house at Wilson's.

This venture was, as they and everyone in the woods behind them knew, a massive risk. Between the two of them, they carried nearly a third of the Creek's lead-throwing firepower – assuming, as Wilson had pointed out, the Winchester, with its six .30-30 cartridges, was in actual firing condition. Should they, and their equipment, fall into the hands of the invaders, it could well spell doom for the Creek. As things stood, very likely the invaders represented doom anyway,

should they break out across Holyrood's into the farms toward Hall. The risk had appeared acceptable to them, and to Wilson Wilson.

"You get into too much trouble," he'd said, "You had better fire every round you have, or, failing that, get into a building and burn yourselves and the guns down with it. We might be able to back you up and get you out of there – but we most likely *won't*. 'K?" They had nodded soberly.

Huskey caught up to Karen. He noted with approval that she continued to watch ahead, with her head half turned to listen to him. "We're almost to the second gate into Wilson's," he said quietly. "That what you wanted?"

"Yes," Karen replied. "There's a mixed yard of young apricots and nectarines here, and we're shielded from the buildings by a big compost bin. The fire is on the other side of that. There is some tall grass, not scythed yet, to hide us getting from here to there."

"Sounds good." "K, I'll go point, and open the gate a bit, and we'll crawl into the grass. We're liable to cut a wide swath, though, with all this gear."

The gate was a typical Creek concoction of steel posts cannibalized from the old Ridge security fence, and barbed wire, with a swath of blackberries encouraged to grow along each side, trained to both hide the gate and allow it to swing. Black hawthorn trees had been encouraged to provide additional camouflage, blending the site into the long hedge. Only one gate in each of the border hedges had been kept clear; and each of the obvious gates had been placed so that it was covered from a house, a blockhouse, or a crow's nest.

Huskey pushed through, stopping every few seconds to examine the surroundings, while Karen watched behind them, in case the bandits had also invested Holyrood's. Eventually he beckoned to Karen. "All clear." She replaced her arrow in the quiver, so as to be able to travel on all fours.

They lay down in file in the rain-jeweled autumn grasses and crawled, bellies off the ground, weapons awkwardly pushed ahead of them, for what seemed a very long time. At length they came to the edge of the scythed ground around the compost bins, structures made of small-diameter logs stacked like log houses, but left unchinked to admit air to the rotting vegetation piled within.

Aiming for an unplied bin with the side toward them open, they rose as one and walked almost tiptoe across exposed ground among the apricot trees, and with a breath of relief reached the limited cover. Karen habitually re-nocked her arrow and moved to the straw-bedecked gaps in the opposite wall to examine the ground between herself and the smoldering stamping shed.

To her horror, she saw five bald men, with black-painted



cheekbones, all armed and wearing pre-Undoing clothing and boots, walking toward her along a farm path. They would reach the compost bin in seconds!

Karen pirouetted carefully to face the open side, arrow drawn, her eyes wide. This was all the information Huskey needed; setting aside the suspect rifle for the moment, he silently slid the crossbow from his shoulder and aimed to the same place.

The men ambled, single file, past the corner of the compost bin, aiming for "gate number three," the main undisguised hedge gate to

the right of the one the Creekers had slipped through. The "tail-end Charlie," carrying a laminated fiberglass compound bow with a ready carbon arrow, remembered at the last moment his role as rear guard, and turned nonchalantly to look into the bin.

Huskey released his bolt into the rear guard's chest; the man gave an alarmingly loud sigh and released his arrow as he fell into the man behind him; it passed weakly between Huskey and Karen. Karen aimed for the man at the head of the procession, catching him in the buttocks with her arrow. He whirled with a shout, brandishing a large and businesslike pistol, which let off a round into the air with an ear-shattering bang, then fell to his knees, reaching for the arrow behind his back.

Suddenly the scene became a blur in Karen's mind, despite her best efforts to concentrate.

The remaining three bandits had the presence of mind to grab their hurt companions, including the one with the pistol, and make for cover around the compost bin to the right.

One of them stopped to fit an arrow. Huskey dropped the crossbow and drew and fired the Ruger, which then somehow fell from his hand. The man looked at his now useless drawing arm, threw the bow at Huskey and ran to join the others. Huskey snatched up the Winchester, hauling back the hammer with his thumb as he did so. He triggered the weapon at his foes through one of the gaps in the logs, but had a misfire. He tried again, and there was a loud report; the space filled with dark and acrid smoke.

Someone replied with the modern pistol, and Huskey ducked instinctively.

Karen briefly remembered her father's admonitions about earplugs – "if nothing else, chew some leaves and stuff them in your ears" – too late, of course. Her ears were ringing and she felt disoriented. But she drew another arrow and ran round the compost bins to the left.

Twenty - thirty - forty steps, turn, ten steps. Hop out, drawn and ready.

There they were! Release. Grab another arrow. Nock, draw, release. They were busy fighting Huskey; one of them had the big pistol and fired it into the bin; the carbine fizzed again in reply. Another arrow, nock, draw, release. A foe discovered her; he'd dropped his crossbow but drew a long Bowie knife and rushed her.

No time for an arrow; no time for the sword either! Her old training kicked in.

Karen waited at the corner till the man was within striking distance, knife extended, and gripped his forearm, turning on her back foot and helping him on his way. The momentum carried him halfway to the apricot trees. When he recovered and came running back, yelling, he faced the small muzzle of the tiny green pistol wrapped in both her

hands. The pistol jumped; the muzzle flash was bright even in the daylight.

A miss? From three meters?

He was almost on her again. Remembering not to try to fire until the trigger had cycled, she stepped aside again, and ran round him in a half circle. From almost behind him, she gave her trigger another long, smooth pull, and the tiny, unbelievably loud weapon squirmed back in her hand a second time. The bandit had swept at her with the wicked knife blade again as she went by, and she discovered her left shoulder had opened and gone appallingly numb.

She switched to a one-handed grip, tracking the man's trajectory. He hopped strangely, stuck the wall, bounced off, turned toward her again, but sagged back against it. Light was going out of his eyes. No miss – she'd shot him twice, but adrenaline had kept him going. He changed his grip on the knife for a throw. Karen shot him again, almost dropping the Kel-Tec. A *deja-vu* of a similar fight, in the snows of the northern Sierra, crossed her mind for a brief second, and then she remembered to stay aware. Stepping past her now sitting, and very quiet, opponent, she checked again around the corner.

There had been gunfire during her altercation with the lone bandit; ending with an eardrum-shattering boom. All of their present foes were lying on the ground, two of them convulsing. She should "double tap," but this position was exposed to other buildings, and even as she considered this, an arrow arrived, burying itself in the wood only inches in front of her. Holstering the pistol and picking up her bow, Karen ran back around toward Huskey's hiding place. She drew another arrow from the quiver as she did so, but her left hand, which held the bow, could not sustain a draw. Dropping the bow at the corner of the empty compost bin, she drew the sword and rushed in.

Huskey lay on the mud floor, fouled with mud and blood. Karen stuck the sword upright in the compost, ready to hand, and knelt over Huskey. Big man. It would take time to check over all of him.

"Where are you hurt?" Karen asked.

"Huh! All of me." He tried to grin, but it was more of a grimace. "I got them, they got me, they got me again, I shot again and it blew up on me."

Karen looked at the Winchester. Its barrel had bulged at the front of the receiver and blown apart. Squib round? She looked at Huskey again. Both his eyes were closed, and he was bleeding from beneath the lids. It looked like they'd been splattered with something from the explosion. He was also clearly bleeding from his right arm and somewhere around the inner thighs as well. She pulled up his jerkin and pulled it back down again, pain searing her from her left arm as she did so. "I don't think you got it in the torso, sir; you might just live."

"Not worried about that, though the Creek does not need a blind man. Make sure they're not rushing us, that's th' main thing."

Oh! right! Karen stood up and peered through the logs. No one in sight.

Something punched her, hard, in the left arm again. As she heard the shot, she looked, bemused, down at her arm. There was a hole in one of the small logs, and another in her forearm, with Douglas fir splinters embedded all around it. Bleeding had already commenced; dark. Not arterial; small favors.

They can see me. Karen sat down, hard, in the mud, and drew the Kel-Tec again. She squirmed backwards against the upright in the corner for what concealment she could find, and peered through one of the lowest gaps.

Still no one coming, and no one visibly moving among the bodies just in front of her. Where had the shot come from?

The little log beside her face bloomed splinters and a hole appeared. A small geyser of mud spattered her legs and Huskey's. This would be the repeating rifle they'd heard about, up high. Second floor or attic dormers of the house, perhaps?

This isn't cover. Now what?

Huskey spoke. "Karen, we done good. That was a fourth of 'em. But you aren't gonna live without us foxin' him somehow. Can you move me?"

"Maybe a little. My arm ... " She pointed, then realized he could not see the gesture.

"Brace yourself along the wall and pull me upright. No argument; *put me where you are now!* ... and get around the corner into the compost."

Karen understood; sinking lower, she dug her heels into the muck, locked her good arm with Huskey's and heaved him to her. Splinters flew again at the movement, and Huskey flinched and grunted as the report sounded. "Where's th' wheelgun?" She found and handed it to him. "Now go!" She went, forcing her left hand to take the sword, pistol in her right hand.

The Ruger fired, blindly, in the direction of the farm buildings. The bandit rifle fired again, twice, and Karen, huddled behind a heap of straw mixed with apple pulp and veggie parings, heard nothing more from the bin to her left.

She popped her magazine, one-handed, and counted peeps of brass through the holes. She'd fired three. She thought so, but it was always good to check. Reaching into her other "vest" pocket, hands trembling with shock and dismay, she found her film can of spare rounds and counted out three new rounds; these she loaded into the magazine with her right thumb. It was taking much, much longer than she expected; and she dropped the last one twice. Each time she had to

pick it up with the magazine seated in the palm of her hand, which was amazingly sweaty, and line up the round with the steel lips again. Sweat was in her eyes, too; she knew it wasn't the rain by the way it stung. *Remember to breathe.*

The last round snapped into place just as her hand was giving out. She seated the magazine gently, and became puzzled as to how she was going to rack the slide. Then she remembered there would be a round chambered already. If she'd shot the magazine empty she could not have reloaded the pistol, not with her left arm in this condition. How much blood was she losing? She must try not to slip from consciousness.

Wait, what was that? Someone was crawling toward her bin! She aimed, wobbling badly, at the corner. Was it Huskey? Let it be Huskey! No. A hand appeared, then another, with the big ugly pistol in it. Then a head came round the corner, bit by bit. Bald.

∴

"Hey down there!" The unexpected voice drifted down the dark stairwell.

Carey Murchison halted his discussion with the newly recruited runner, one of the Perkins kids from Tomlinson's, and stepped over to the doorway. He looked up the stairs.

"Mary, *what* are you doing here?"

"Just being sociable. Got a couple of strong girls up here to haul me down, shall we stop by?"

"Sure, sure. We'll move the table a bit for you."

Mary was helped down the steps; she could do it under her own power but it would have taken a lot out of her. The helpers proved to be Mrs. Ames and Mrs. Lazar, off shift from the "hospital" across the road. Winded, they practically fell into the available folding chairs.

"Comfy furniture ya got here, Murchie." Mary picked up a yellowed, mostly used-up steno pad from the table and fanned herself. "Nice stale air, too."

Murchison winced. "Murchie" was not one of his favored nicknames. "Sociable, mmh? Tell me more."

"Guy, we're in trouble, aren't we?"

Carey looked at the three of them. Probably the time for most secrets was long gone. "Are you thinking about the little war we have in hand or your radio research?"

"Both, bud. Think it's all connected?"

Murchison offered them cold chamomile tea, which Mary waved off with the steno pad. "Might not be," he said. "But it could be, if any of them get away."

"Mm-hmm. And if we're busy putting everything back together, and

finding enough to eat for whomever is left over from this, when the next wave comes, fella, I don't think we're gonna pull through. Even," she said emphatically, slapping down the steno pad, "if we come up with those primers for all your old brass. We gotta reorganize."

"Agreed." Murchison, who'd not yet sat down, did so, rather gingerly.

Mary looked at him. *Why, the man's a practically a skeleton! Why didn't I know about this?* "'Agreed,' he says. Y'know, guy, I thought you were gonna be more invested in your cute little suburban layout. I was all set for a pissing match here."

"Nahh, Mary, we still gotta farm. But I hear you, and I think we might be on the same page."

Mrs. Lazar, a round-shouldered woman with a halo of frizzy gray hair, spoke up. "All man's striving is for his mouth." They looked at her. "Ecclesiastes," she added.

"That's right, Ava," said the Captain, smiling. "Food is primary. And as Dr. Mary here is noting, we're living in a time when both the food and our persons need constant safeguarding. We will reorganize."

"Castle and demesne, Carey?"

"Yes. Ridge is the castle. Hall here is the demesne, and perhaps we will have to move most of the village here. It would certainly help, with centralization, to have more horses."

"Wait, wait. Ridge? Way up there! How can we build up at that lookout, Murchie; it's a solid ball of basalt!"

"Well, there's more to it than you might think. The Department of Defense had an experimental facility in days gone by; Ellen and I were part of the Marine contingent providing security. There are five floors of subterranean rooms inside. *Big rooms.*"

Mrs. Ames' mouth dropped open. Ava leaned forward. Mary tipped her head to one side. "How big?"

"You could fit everyone at the Creek inside, with room for a little privacy. And lots of food. Maybe even some stock. There's plenty of water. In fact –" he turned to a ledger sitting on the desk – "We send Avery full accounting of everything we pass on to them from Hall, and he sends back full accounting of everything that has arrived, its disposition, and condition. We've been stocking your castle for over fifteen years, Mary. Want to go see?"

"I do indeed!" Mary leaned forward, like Ava. "Facility? What was their gig, *Sergeant Murchison?*"

"We didn't ask and were never told. Maybe if you look it over, you can tell us something about it. We've been meaning to invite you, anyway, but the list of things we wanted from your group just grew and grew. And it seemed like need-to-know was best policy, and maybe we overdid it."

Mary opened her mouth in an "O" and fluttered her hands in the air

in mock shock.

"And defense? How do you defend a cave?" asked Mrs. Ames.

She's swifter than she looks, thought Murchison. "Very badly, if at all. Till now we have depended on concealment. Might be time soon to begin some new construction."

Ava Lazar held up a hand, palm out, as if offering a benediction.

"These will I bring to my holy mountain," she intoned.

"What?" asked Mary.

Mrs. Lazar shrugged. "Isaiah."

"Ri-i-ight." Mary wheeled around. "Murchie?" she asked, uncharacteristically softly. "Are we losing you?"

He looked up from the ledger, which had drawn his attention.

"Yes."

"So, may we ask, how long is it you have, yet?" asked Mrs. Lazar.

"Give or take a few weeks, about two months. In fact," he added, grimacing, "You've caught me on a good day."

:::

Emilio Molinero would have liked to have waited for the messenger to return from Wilson with an explanation of the new developments, but whatever had been going on over at the farm certainly sounded urgent.

Gunplay, albeit sporadic, had been going on for minutes, which felt like years, and now consisted entirely of the flat crack of the bandits' semiautomatic rifle. His own forces had only the one black powder rifle and a long, heavy cap-and-ball revolver (now in his possession) with which to reply to this weapon. The bandits' leader undoubtedly had range, skill and ammunition in his favor, as well as the home ground, in a manner of speaking.

Cautious by nature, Emilio disliked marching his very young and poorly armed charges down the hedgerow to the road, disliked herding them along it, disliked fording the Creek, and disliked approaching the occupied tree farm, now bristling with harm, but there it was. He could never have imagined removing his shirt and hugging a hornet's nest to his chest, and this felt something like that; but the thought of Juanita and the boys steadied him.

Looking over the bank of Starvation Creek between the roots of two cottonwood, he could see the two redwoods where he had camped with his co-workers – was it only yesterday? The evening before? – and the main house, partly obscured behind them. On either hand it was guarded by one of the little blockhouses.

Did the bandits know yet that these were connected to the house by tunnels?

Perhaps he had the beginnings of a plan. Surely some of the bandits

were absorbed in the activities which had made so much noise; now would be the time to take advantage.

Emilio turned to see whom he had on his left. To his mild surprise, it was Vernie with the Hawken; his sense of tactics was offended. The two firearms should be farther apart in the line.

"Hello, Vernie. Tell me ... *down!*"

They both ducked. An arrow passed though the place where they had both been, and struck a young man in the shoulder, who should not have been standing in the first place. Though it did not penetrate deeply, the surprise carried him off balance, and he fell backwards down the embankment with his head in the creek. Two of his friends rushed to his aid; several others shot arrows and bolts ineffectually in the direction of the attacker, who was well concealed behind a walnut tree at the entrance gate, to their left. Already he was fitting another arrow and raising the alarm.

"Ah, we are all so careless," Emilio said. "And I most of all. Vernie, please, see if you can do something with that man when he next takes aim."

Vernie shouldered the Hawken, with its ladder sight raised, and steadied his aim. The still-shouting scout appeared again, and the boom of the Hawken, which only Emilio expected, made him jump along with everyone else. Heavy gray smoke drifted back into the underbrush. The enemy archer reluctantly dropped the bow, painfully got to his hands and knees, and began crawling toward the house. Several bowmen drew beads on him.

"Hold fire, everyone, please," requested Emilio. "And it is not a good range for me with this." He waved the Colt Navy, which glistened in the light rain. "Who here is our best archer?"

Heads turned toward a blond young man about five meters feet to Emilio's right, holding a large crossbow. He recognized him as a Hisey shepherd. "Will you do us the honor, please?"

"Yes, sir."

The crossbowman knelt behind a patch of horsetails along the top of the embankment, aimed, tracking the crawling figure, and fired. The bolt sailed past the bald man's nose.

"Damn. Leading him too much. Sorry."

"Please. You are very good considering the distance; take your time. Everyone else, stay very low, but watch the houses, the hedges and the trees. No more surprises for us, please."

The archer stepped down the embankment, sword dragging in the soft sand behind him, and stepped in the stirrup of his crossbow, cranking the string back to the notch. He drew and placed a bolt, then climbed back up to the horsetail patch.

The man, now halfway to the house, shouted something again, and a reply came from one of the windows. The rifle had gone silent; was

it being brought round to the front? Time might yet turn against them. Distractedly, Emilio bit one of his nails to the quick.

The crossbow sang its tiny tune again. The bolt struck the crawling man in the short ribs and disappeared; he lay down dejectedly, drew himself into a fetal position, and did not move again.

"Jeeah!" someone said.

"Well," said Emilio, "now we all are veterans. Veterans and the dead share much, my friends. Vernie, are you reloaded?"

His companion nodded. "Sorry I'm not faster."

"You will improve. All right, my friends. Vernie and I will run to the corner of that blockhouse on the right, with four grenadiers." He indicated those who would go. "We will attempt to fire the building and perhaps return. If we do not succeed, another six – you two, and the remaining four grenadiers will attempt the same again. If the blockhouse burns or is vacated, there will be a tunnel. We must get beneath the main house and set it aflame as well. Most of you remain here and prepare to shoot, should any come within range, or if necessary, chase down and cross blades with any who run away. Keep as well covered from the upper windows as you can. It is not perfect, but so we find it, yes?"

Heads nodded.

Emilio and Vernie, with their four grenadiers, crawled up among the horsetails, checked all their gear, and ran down between two rows of leafless young pear trees toward the corner of one of the blockhouses. No shots came from the rifle, wherever it was. There was activity at one of the loopholes of the blockhouse, but the angle was poor for firing upon them; the archer inside was awaiting a better opportunity, as Emilio had foreseen. Upon arrival, the six of them at first had no clear idea what to do; the roof was too steep for a Molotov cocktail, and the loopholes too small to fit one through. The crossbowman inside was maneuvering about at the loophole to their right, desperately trying to find a target.

"Here," said Vernie. "Light one of those things and hand it to me." This was done; he applied it to the left loophole and held it in place with the barrel of the Hawken.

"Wait," said Emilio. "That will –"

"I know. Put me out if I burn." Vernie turned his head away to protect his eyes.

There was a small firecracker blast. Glass flew out in all directions, with blue-tinged flames behind it; Vernie dropped the enflamed rifle, shouted in pain and rolled on the grass. The now-unarmed grenadier beat with her hands at the remaining flames on Vernie's sleeve.

Inside the tiny building, there was a yelp and the sound of someone trying to put out a small fire inside. Emilio stepped round to the right-hand loophole, feeling terribly exposed, while hauling back the long-

legged hammer of the Colt. Squeezing the trigger as he came opposite the dark hole, he loosed a ball into the interior, and while he had little hope of a lucky hit, the noise and the extra smoke seemed to make up someone's mind inside. Everyone could hear the door-bar rasping as it was lifted. The heavy door squeaked on its hinges; someone would be running away.

"Quick, light one of the bombs and throw it over the building." But battle shakes had seized the remaining young grenadiers; the box of matches was spilled. Emilio shrugged and stepped around the corner, again fully exposed to the main house. Someone from the blockhouse was in full flight. Emilio cocked and fired again, twice. On the second shot, the man staggered, but kept running.

Wasteful. Stick to the program. Emilio dodged back around the corner. "Vernie!"

"Here!"

"Get from the young ones another fuel bomb, please, and give it to me! With matches!"

"Right here!"

"Good; now cover me against the house from the left side."

Emilio ran round to the door. An arrow struck the doorjamb in front of his face; he ducked beneath it. A bolt flew into the calf of his right leg, as the Hawken, around the corner, spoke in reply. He threw himself, dizzy with pain, into the interior and set down the bomb and the revolver to see about removing the bolt from his stunned flesh. The air was terribly thick with smoke, which poured around him and out the doorway. Coughing, Emilio tried to draw the bolt, but this was beyond his will. Hellish pain! He tried again. His whole body seemed to grow cold, his head light. Forget it – the trap door! *Stick to the program!*

Pulling himself up by one post of the bunk beds, Emilio found the inconspicuous brass hat-hook that released the false wall. He hurled the beds over, and turned for the Molotov. To his horror, he discovered the bed frame had fallen on the revolver. No time to retrieve it – he was almost out of air. Grabbing scattered matches, he stuck several, with their improvised strike, in his teeth, scooped up the spirits-and-fats-filled wine bottle, and descended into the hole in the floor that waited behind the false wall, head first. The crossbow bolt twitched against the edge of the hole, causing Emilio to gasp, losing the matches and strike in the dark. By feel, he rounded most of them up again, cradled the bottle in the crooks of his arms, and crawled into the tunnel.

This culvert, half a meter or so in diameter and made from salvaged steel culvert pipe from before the Undoing, was not like those at Ames', as it was not well drained. *Ah, Allyn, not so good! This will embarrass your farm.* There was dank standing water; he must be

even more careful with the matches now, and the crossbow bolt persisted in dragging against the spiral steel ridges of the tunnel. From somewhere above him came the boom of the muzzle-loading rifle. Emilio crawled, surprised to find the cold water soaking his elbows, belly, and knees bothering him, if anything, more than his mangled calf.

How far to the house? How far?

Ah, we are here at last. Draw the bolts. Yes, the door is the back of a cabinet in the downstairs pantry. Three other such tunnels come to the same room, no doubt. The door at the top of the stairs is ajar; Emilio can see the room has been ransacked. There is a large woven bag of pearled barley, open and partly spilled, in front of the cabinet.

Emilio tries a match, in one hand, upon the strike, in the other. There is a smell like burnt urine. It fails. There are six more matches. They are long, awkward, and uneven, but they are *matches*; in his life he has seen only borrowed coals, flint-and steel, or fires begun with hand lenses.

He tries another. Damn! Another, carefully, carefully! It lights, but he drops it; it falls out of sight into the room. There are shouts, gunfire above. There is a smell of gunpowder, a different smell than that of the black powder with which he is familiar. Booted feet running about. Someone might come for more food, if these men abscond. Another match, carefully, please! Yes! Now for the fuse. Ah! The violet flame; lovely. Gently toss the bottle onto the barley. And now to bolt the door back into place and retreat.

Light begins to flicker beyond the trapdoor. Air flows past him, pouring through the cracks to feed flame in the room beyond.

But wait! The crossbow bolt is caught on something. In the narrow space, Emilio cannot now pull forward nor go back, nor turn to reach for his pinioned leg to free it. Damn! Damn. Must move. Must!

Cannot.

Ah. So it is. A better life for Juanita and the boys, yes? Please? Thank-you-Jeeah-for-all-that-was-good.

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With more and more concern, Vernie watched white smoke filling the Wilson house; bandits would surely be coming out of it soon, coughing and wheezing, which would be a good thing, as it would be the end for them; but there was no sign of Emilio backing out of the tunnel! He turned to one of the young grenadiers.

"When they start hitting the yard, light and throw everything you've got at them. Ready?"

"We can't, sir, Mr. Molinero has the strike for the matches."

"You were down to *one*?"

Contrite heads bowed in reply.

"Oh. Well, we could find a way to get one going with the rifle, I suppose; but that will take too long. Here," he said to one of them, "you take this thing and if they show, haul back the hammer all the way, aim at them just like your crossbow, and squeeze the trigger. Keep it snug on your shoulder or you'll get a hell of a bruise. Lean into it a little when you shoot. 'K?'" Rest of you be ready with your knives for any trouble, or, heck, smack 'em over the head with the fricking bombs. Here's the whistle, too, in case the bandits still have any fight in them and come for you. Everybody along the creek will help. I'm going in after Emilio."

"Yes, sir," said the oldest, taking the big Hawken and the whistle on its cord.

Jeeah, he must be all of ten, thought Vernie. *Are we going to make it through this? And what will we be like?*

He dropped the shot pouch and powder flask and ran round the building, dodging in through the open door. No one was shooting from the house. The culvert was tiny by Emilio's standard's; for Vernie it was a dangerously tight squeeze. Also, cold and wet; but the long dark puddle was the least of Vernie's worries. As there was no room for his elbows, he had to lay himself out with his arms ahead of him and inch along like a very cramped caterpillar. Air was flowing past his ears into the darkness ahead; of course, the fire must be drawing it through the tunnel.

The rifle boomed somewhere above him.

"Emilio!" he shouted.

"I am here. Why are you not fighting our enemies?" The voice sounded a dishearteningly long way away.

"I *am*. This is how I'm doing it right now. Are you coming?"

"I cannot move; I think there is a hole in the pipe somewhere behind me and I have a bolt in my leg which has gotten into the hole."

Vernie redoubled his crawling effort. The burnt arm throbbed. "You were shot?"

"Yes. It is not so very bad a hurt, but now my head is getting hot."

"Well, hang on, an' I'll come and unhook you."

"Thank you, Vernie. Though I still think you should be shooting bandits."

"Oh, *shush* up."

...

Wolf waited a bit longer to see if he'd indeed finished off whomever had been killing Cougar's crew; they had chosen a flimsy place to attack from and Wolf had been able to silence them with the AK by firing at shadowy movements in the muck bins. Cougar apparently had some fight in him still, as Wolf had watched him crawl around

toward the other side of the bin, with the Glock. But he could not hear any shooting. What was going on down there?

New sounds attracted his attention, from the direction of the house. He moved to the north window of the lookout and discovered that "Wilson's" was on fire, or at least full of smoke! Even as he watched, the smoke trapped in one of the basement windows turned orange; that was it, then. His men were pouring out the back door and charging round to the front, where at least one of the black powder weapons greeted them. An arrow sailed out from in front of the house and embedded itself in a stack of crates.

Past time to go; and no time now for regrets. Should he fetch the female from the outhouse? Something in his bones told him, though, that these people were beyond the bargaining stage. Disappear now before the farmers from the saddle joined the fight. Wolf lifted the trap door.

∴

Taking the reloaded Kel-Tec in her teeth, Karen picked up the sword, "Why not? You're all done here. Unless there's some kind of *country* you're fighting for, which I doubt, you might as well make yourself useful."

Suddenly a man ran past the bins, well away to the right among the trees, with an assault rifle in his hands. Karen shifted her aim, but he was already past a reasonable shot, loping along the orchard row. If he'd been looking for a fight, he'd surely have spotted them, but he was focused entirely on the gate in the hedge. She got up on her knees, hobbled over to the armed hand, which was trying to aim round the corner at her, and gave it a hard smack with the flat of her blade. The pistol dropped into the mud. There was a satisfactory groan. Quickly dropping the sword, she scooped up the pistol – whoa, heavy! – put it behind her, opened her mouth and let her own more familiar little pistol fall into her hand. This one, at least, she knew was loaded. She found the grip and pointed the muzzle at the bald head. The bandit spoke.

"*Shit*, lady, *you've* shot me, your *guy's* shot me, I'm *dying* here, and here you go break my *effin' hand*."

The right thing to do would be to shoot him now and end it; but curiosity got the better of her. "Sorry it's not your day, but why are you here? And who's in charge?"

The house, across the farmyard, began making popping and clanging sounds, and glass began shattering. They could both feel heat coming from that direction and hear shouts and the sounds of a desperate fight developing.

"Why should I tell *you*?" He crept forward a bit, showing a wide face and large mouth, and looked at her sardonically. She backed up,

sitting on his pistol, her useless left arm dragging and distracting her. But now that she saw his face, she knew she would never forget it. This could so easily be one of the farmers, running sheep or scything ryegrass. There was a childlike quality in his expression.



Karen's "prisoner" turned his head toward the fleeing man. "Wolf!" he shouted. "Help!" But help from that direction was clearly no longer to be had. Slowly he turned back his head toward Karen and rested it on the ground, dejected. His fingers dug into the mud convulsively.

"That was your leader?" She gestured with the .380.

"What's it to ya? Eff. *Eff*. Oh, shit. Shit. Y'all gutshot me, y'know that?"

"Well, sorry, but we weren't the ones looking for this war."

"Who was looking for a *war*?" His eyes blazed. "We were looking for *food*. Wouldn't *you*?" And with that, he suddenly threw mud into Karen's face and came scrabbling round the corner post.

Karen fired blindly, twice; her weapon then jammed and was knocked from her hand. Fingers struck the side of her head, then groped for her throat. Hunching up, she dug the big pistol out from the muck beneath her, shoved the barrel into the ribcage above her and fired again; the weight of a large man, for the first time in her life, fell upon her and lay still.

For awhile, Karen felt oddly disembodied. Despite the awful impact on her ears of all the gunplay of the last few minutes, she could hear, as if from the other end of a long pipe, much of what was going on around her.

The house was in full flame, with old, drained plumbing and packed Mason jars exploding, and the crackling of hundreds of burning knots in century-old fir and pine sheathing. Stud walls were buckling, shattering whatever windows had not given way before the heat, which was intense even here at the compost heaps, a good fifty meters away. A gun fired somewhere. A woman screamed from time to time, with a hopeful note in her voice. People were shouting orders; then there was not much to be heard, other than the hiss and roar of the flames, for awhile.

The man had fallen across her at an angle, with his head beside hers. Hot moisture pooled on her, through her tunic, and gradually cooled. She could smell the stench of his soiled clothing. This, she knew from experience, was to be expected.

Darkness was coming on, but the smoke from the house fire, which rose straight up toward the clouds, turned gray, then black, and was filled with sparks and flying debris. *This is pretty*, she thought.

But now I think I'm ... tired.

A heavier rain began falling steadily, but Karen took no notice of it at all.

∴

Doc Chaney was wearing out; too much to do! *If we all pull through this, I have got to get some apprentice medics*. The big house at Beemans' was filling up with hurt people; also with sick people. Whatever it was Ellen Murchison had was apparently spreading to some of her young crusaders.

"Tom?" Elsa was standing by his elbow, with a small basket of dried opium poppy pods in one hand, a steaming mug in the other.

"Mmh?"

"Okay if we steam some of these? We're out of the real thing, it being fall, but maybe we can get some good out of them."

"Sure, sure. We're kind of working in the dark here in more ways than one."

"Oh, about that, Vernie's crew is off to Jones' again to get more lamps and candles and anything remotely medicinal, as well as blankets and food. When that place is cleaned out, we'll strip Ames'."

"Yes. Thanks, dear. But Vernie's hurt, himself!"

"Not as badly as most of the others, and it keeps him from freaking over Tomma, who's getting fevered."

"That might come to another amputation, but at least it wouldn't be a double. We need to get more bread mold going ... who's next?"

"You are. Sit down and take a tea break – here's a hot cup." Tom complied.

Emilio hobbled in, on Ellen Murchison's crutch.

"Emilio, you should be resting."

"There is too much coughing; who can sleep? I am as well right now, doctor, as I can be. I am glad to see you sitting down for once."

"Whatever. I think there's going to be much more work, soon; the coughing is beginning to sound like pertussis. You and I will probably both get a dose of it before it runs its course."

Emilio, keeping one leg off the floor, stumped on the crutch into the pool of light cast by a cluster of small alcohol lamps on the table next to Tom; he'd obviously hoped to crash on the nearby couch, but he could now see it was occupied by an unconscious young man whose torso was wrapped in bandages. His blanket had fallen on the floor. Dr. Tom got up, covered the sleeper again, and taking his cup, moved to a three-legged stool which he drew from under the table. He motioned Emilio to the easy chair which he'd just vacated. Emilio showed momentary distaste for the consideration, but accepted, plunking himself down with a sigh.

"Want to put your foot up here?" Tom patted his knee.

"That will not be necessary." Emilio arranged himself as comfortably as possible, holding the crutch upright by the side of the chair.

He gazed at Dr. Chaney for a few moments. "It was you that introduced me to Juanita. For which, if I have not thanked you one thousand times and a time, I do so now."

"You had a close call in the culvert."

"I had given up my life for *lost*. As so many others have done, the last three days. It amazes me that Mr. Vernie did what he did; I would have thought he could not fit in so small a space."

"You didn't come through unscathed," smiled Tom. "Have you seen what's happened to your hair?"

"It is of no concern. Do we have numbers?"

"Nothing final. We know of about twenty-two dead of our own, from all the fights, and from an accident with an ox-cart coming in from Maggie's. At Chaney's, Hall, and here, we're tending sixteen wounded. That might be a low count. Some sick, too, or both. There are some missing as well, including, from Ames', your guest, Karen Rutledge."

Emilio gave Tom an aggrieved look. "She is not a *guest*, Dr. Chaney, she is *family*. From the day she came to Ames' she has given her all."

"Well, we're out looking. She's very tough."

"And from the uninvited guests?"

"We think we got them all; there were, by Ellen Murchison's count, thirty-one to begin with. We've tallied twenty-six bodies, including two men that had been left at Lawson's. We'll be checking Wilsons' in the morning; it's all collapsed into the basement and too hot to handle. If any got away, we'll start tracking."

One of Emilio's young grenadiers appeared in the doorway. "Sir, we gotcha Ames lady; they're bringing her up the walkway!"

"Alive?" asked Tom. Emilio began wrestling with the crutch in an effort to get up from the chair.

She nodded vigorously. "Mm-hmm. One arm messed up, and they said, umm, hyporetical?"

"Hypothermia. Who even knows that term anymore?"

"Mr. Wilson Wilson, Doctor. From Ridge. He found her, along with Mr. Huskey, and a dead bandit."

"They're not bringing Huskey here?"

Her face fell. "He, he didn't make it, sir; so he's been brought just to the road for now."

Emilio found his footing and hopped over to her.

"Thank you for so much good news as you could bring; are you still on duty?"

"Oh, no, just thought you'd like to know. 'M'off to bed now, and hope you're feeling better soon." She turned and vanished from the doorway.

Tom got up from the stool. "It's back to work for me."

"Yes, sir. Do you work on this table?"

"Hm? No, it's too small, except for patients that can sit up. I've been working on the floor here."

"Ah. Well, I shall retire to the kitchen."

Elsa came in with Wilson, who was wearing a pre-Undoing green rain slicker, very wet, and carrying a large canvas sack.

Elsa's eyes found Tom.

"Yes," Dr. Chaney said. "More new work. Coming in here?"

"They're bringing the stretcher up the steps." She looked at Wilson

and Emilio.

"It is our signal to take ourselves away for now, Mr. Wilson," said Emilio. "Come into the kitchen with me, and if there is enough room for us, we can get you warmed, dried, and fed, yes?"

"That'd be lovely, Mr. Molinero. Lead the way."

They found the kitchen not too crowded, but up and running, with two young women tending fire and serving up a thin but welcome soup of reconstituted greens, onion, and tomatoes, with a trace of rabbit. Hot applesauce was also on offer. The "real" tea had long ago run out, but as Wilson set down the apparently heavy bag and shucked his raincoat, a mug of rose hip and elderberry tea was put into his hand, and a seat, on a long high-backed bench along the wall by the open hearth, was vacated for the two men.

Emilio set aside the crutch, warmed his hands at the fire, and waited for Wilson to have a chance at the tea before questioning him.

Wilson took a long pull at the tea, then made a face. He looked around, found an alcohol lamp going on a wall sconce, took it down, blew it out, drew a scrap of cloth from his pocket, unscrewed the hot burner from the collar, poured some of the alcohol into the tea, reassembled the lamp, and replaced it. One of the cooks shook her head, but said nothing.

"I'm good, now," said Wilson. "I can see you're being very patient with me."

"Ah so, if I may ask, where were they?"

"We took one last look at the area around the compost heaps, because there'd been four enemy dead right by it and signs they'd been in a fire fight. Huskey was on the inside, with Mr. Avery's Ruger in his hand and a blown up levergun by his side." He waved a spoon at the canvas bag. "They're in there. The girl was in the next bin, half buried in a pile of cowshit, with one of the bandits dead on top of her.

"Had a funny little semiauto next to her, with a stovepipe ..."

"Which is?"

"Sorry, I pick up talk from the Murchisons. A kind of cycling failure of ammunition ejection."

"Proceed."

"... and another big old antique semiauto in her hand; all bloody. The guy'd been shot any number of times and had one of her arrows sticking out of his backside, too."

"Very hard to kill."

"But met his match, I'd guess."

"What is her injury?"

"Well, we don't know; it was really dark out there. But left arm is bad, I'm pretty sure. Laid out in the rain for hours; that couldn't have helped any."

"I am thinking. These two must be the fighters we heard in the

midafternoon, yes? No one else was with them?"

Wilson looked at Emilio sheepishly. "Ah, well. S'my fault; I let 'em talk me into it; something about stirring things up in the rear. We kinda thought we were on our own. Pin them down until Hall sent some kind of army."

"Sergeant Ellen had hoped to co-ordinate."

"Yeah, your runner got to us right after they left. Y'know, it made *sense* to us at the time."

"It was like Mrs. Murchison's views, but, you see, we did not have the smoke on the north side."

"And then the rest of us got into *your* fight too slowly. We've caused you some casualties; including you, sir. I'm not coming out of this looking very good, in fact; and Huskey's people will have it in for me after this."

Emilio shook his head. "We will all discuss the best ways to do things. But there will be much to do and little time for blame. It may be this attack was the right thing. There were, you say, *five* dead bandits there. I am thinking these two did the Creek much good; the attack on the house was relatively easy in the end."

"You're generous, Mr. Molinero. I'm not sure I'd be so easygoing if the shoe were on the other foot."

Emilio looked down ruefully at his bandaged and braced leg, with a swollen, stockinged foot at the end. "It may be it will be some time before there is a shoe on the other foot, my friend."

They looked at each other for several anxious moments. Then, mutual permission granted, they laughed.

Elsa appeared at the door. "Hey, boys, girl's asking for you. Says it's urgent."

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Wolf had passed through, or over, at least six gates. Some were locked, some not. In several fields, sheep had watched him pass by; in one, two red cows. There were small plots that had been plowed and seeded; others had been harvested, or interrupted in the process of being harvested.

If you could have asked Wolf, later, what he had seen, he might have answered, "mostly a whole lot of either dirt or green stuff." He had little idea of what he was seeing; he'd grown up urban in a shattered former nation that, back when it had been functional, had devolved its knowledge of farming upon little more than two percent of the population.

Plots were, small, separated by dense growths of hedge. The pattern, which had seemed clear enough to Wolf from the crow's nest at Wilson's, was bewildering at ground level. But the terrain also provided him abundant concealment, so he was not overly concerned

at slow progress. He'd passed the night in a loosely-piled haystack.

As he walked along the hedgerows, Wolf took inventory. The rain was tapering off, but he was wet through, even beneath the body armor, and his clothes stayed saturated as he moved through the wet, unown vegetation. His boots squeaked, which meant there would soon be blisters unless he could get his boots and socks dry. He'd let himself get separated from the Glock, and his bug-out gear, and was not carrying food or water. His wet and baggy cargo pants were rich in pockets, and in these there were baggies (precious items in themselves) containing an assortment of decades-old treasures: Bic lighters, a Mylar emergency blanket, duct tape, compass, flint-and-steel, aspirin (which he had doled out to his crew as needed), and, in a fragile sandwich bag, a handful of 9mm rounds, with no weapon to match them.

He knew the polyethylene would breathe too easily. The primers would begin to corrode, with all this exposure to sweat and weather. Should he ditch them? This was hard for him to do; they had been the source of so much of his power. There were many, many more where those came from, however; if he could ever get back to his stash.

On his belt was a leather sheath with a serrated Kershaw folding knife nestled within; and in his hands the Chinese-made AK, with ten or fifteen (he had better count them, first chance) rounds in the current magazine, and one in the chamber. The other magazine, taped to the inserted one upside down, was now empty. And he'd lost his scope getting down from the little tower.

His escape both elated and troubled him; for himself, once again Wolf the *Lucky*; but he'd put a lot of investment in the gang of freebooters he'd built up. It was clear to Wolf that there had been no alternative in the end; but the memory of Cougar's plaintive cry for help galled him. All for one, one for all, indeed.

Ah, well, he said to himself. Only the living deserve to live. What's next?

He'd passed the physical plants of four of the farms – each seemed like a small independent village; each, at the moment, was apparently deserted. What sort of command structure was there here? How had all these people co-ordinated to stand their ground rather than stampeding?

He had half a mind to burn the farmsteads as he went, for spite; he was angry with himself for not seeing that this was the route he should have gone with his entire crew, a day ago. But stealth is a good tool for as long as you have it, and not a moment longer. *Best keep the option.* Even as he thought this, Wolf could hear, on the road across the Creek well out of sight, a horse trotting westward. He fought down the impulse to try to catch the rider; that route must be well guarded.

Food, water and socks were becoming the highest priorities.

He chose one of the farmsteads to approach, and crawled toward it through an unkempt thicket of sunchokes, some of which had grown over eight feet tall. There was a smell, among the roots of these, of some kind of edible root, but he was unfamiliar with it. He watched the house for half a hand, and guessed that it, too, had been abandoned for now. People would surely be returning soon. Best get on with it.

The farmhouse was smaller than some of the others he'd seen; one story high, with no crow's nest or blockhouses. Maybe they hadn't got round to it yet? The place could be approached obliquely without being seen easily from windows. He'd have a go. With his weapon at the ready, muzzle down, Wolf ran across the tiny scythed yard, pushed through an unlocked gate in a trimmed hedge, rounded a corner, and bounded up the front steps. With his left hand, he tried the glass doorknob. It turned readily, and the door swung inwards without creaking.

Keeping himself as mentally sharp as any young-old man might – a day after losing most of several night's sleep, several meals, a war, and all his companions – Wolf cleared the rooms, right to left, found no stairwells up or down, and finished his tour in the kitchen. An unremarkable place. Everywhere were some kind of gasburners on wall sconces, pieces of handmade furniture, a few ancient art prints, and quilts on display on some of the walls. Bedrooms had two sets of bunk beds in each, and a worktable; leather tools and sewing supplies abounded. Twelve people, apparently, lived here. This looked like commies more and more all the time. Wolf was amused; he knew Magee would not be.

The kitchen was much smaller than the one at "Wilson Farm" had been, and featured what looked like a gas stove connected to an oversized tank outside, next to a large pile of manure. Wolf had not seen a methane digester before; but he vaguely guessed what it was. Why, with so much animal manure around, had there not been more explosives used? These people had a very hit-or-miss technology. Perhaps there was nothing of real interest on the mountain after all?

Exploring cabinets, Wolf was able to come up with a half-gallon plastic jug for water, after rejecting several that had apparently contained either soap or vinegar. He had trouble understanding why the pitcher pump on the drainboard by the sink didn't seem to want to work, as it smelled of water, but there were emergency supplies in stacked crates of glass bottles marked Smirnoff, and he tapped into this. It was a start. Pouring himself a tumbler, he opened another door, and found an assortment of spoiling dinner leftovers on shelves made of hardware cloth. The floor and ceiling of the former closet were also screened, and Wolf could feel a cool breeze moving up through the shelves.

Clever.

But what's in here? He opened a crock jar and sniffed. Milk, with cream risen to the top! Fresh milk was a novelty to Wolf, but his body knew what it was, and trembled to have it. Bringing the crock to the kitchen table, he poured the water from his tumbler onto the floor and filled it with cream, then sat down, leaning the rifle against the table.

Just as Wolf raised the glass to his bearded lips, he heard movement somewhere overhead. A shuffling of feet.

An attic?

With someone in it!

Setting down the glass reluctantly, Wolf took up the rifle. Then he reconsidered, grasped the tumbler in his left hand, drank it off, set it down, and then moved to the kitchen door at the back of the house.

There was a staircase on the outside of the building, going up to a small door on a landing above the back porch. Inwardly cursing his carelessness in clearing, Wolf stepped outside, ascended the staircase, and tried the door – another glass knob – finding it unlocked as before. Pointing his weapon before him, he cleared a small skylit attic room. It held mostly a rug and a chair and shelves of old books; he stepped through a low door frame into a darkened room with a heavy curtain over a dormer window. A thin magenta light trickled through the curtain into the shadowy interior.

Against the far wall sat a large bed frame, with its legs sawn away to fit the ceiling height. The bed was heaped with blankets and pillows, and among these lay an old man – easily the oldest Wolf remembered ever seeing – looking at him with the unseeing eyes of the blind.

"Hey, young fella! S'whatcha sound like, but you're not one a' the Hiseys by the sound of it. Y'little war over yet?"

"Uhh, no, sir." Wolf stepped over to the bed.

"Wouldn't think so! What a ruckus! They said I had to go to the Mess Hall with 'em, an' I said screw that, just go without me. I manage pretty good up here, s'not winter yet, n'got plenty to eat. Hafta dump my effin' chamber pot out the window, though ... where ya from?"

"Wilson Farm."

"Ah, so you're one 'a those apple maggots. Well, I guess there's a place for cider in this grand scheme. But I betcha we had a thousand pounds of coffee in the PX. Betcha Murch is still sittin' on all of it, too. Crazy bastard. You can tell him I said so; I don't care. All that hush-hush stuff is long gone, and he's been out of honest work for – must be fifteen years. Twenty for all I know."

"Pee-ecks, sir?"

"Oh, you know, a little cafeteria 'n store. For all the engineers and the guards."

"Oh, that's right. You worked in the mountain, didn't you?" Wolf

guessed.

"Funny way to put it. Sure, I wasn't always blind and useless – put in nine years on the power plant, I did. Civil Engineering Corps. You know all that, dontcha?"

"Tell me again; I always liked hearin' about it."

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Wilson Wilson looked sourly into the smoking pit and gestured with the reloaded Ruger Old Army. "Dammit, I was *born* in this house." Disconsolately, he kicked a fried window-latch into the interior.

Deela, carrying the Lyman muzzleloader, stood beside him, fidgeting a bit. "Had we not best begin tracking? The man has sixteen hours' lead on us."

"Yes, well, he could be out of the valley by now. That skinny little fire-eater wasn't able to tell us about him until after midnight, and there's not much moon yet."

"Again, we suffer for lack of dogs."

"Well, those got eaten up long ago. But maybe we can make some use of wolf cubs when we find a den." Wilson turned to the others. "Guchi's back to Hall to organize defense and search from that end. The man was last seen carrying a rifle that can take down everyone here. So, we all have whistles; we are going to cast a wide net, watching ahead and behind us as we go. As much as possible, stay where you can see someone but not both be seen from anywhere at any one time.

"I'll walk point. Mr. Deela here will bring up the rear and watch our backs. Mr. Perkins, please take the far right – you have the Navy Colt? Good. Watch that thing; Mrs. Murchison will have *all* our hides if it gets away again. Minnie Min, center, watch *my* back. Errol, far left. Remember, this man is more a predator than a fugitive. Act accordingly."

"Wilson, who's covering Beemans'?" asked Cal.

"Vernie Watkin is there with the Hawken and a crew of young 'uns, sickies, and woundeds, with bows and bombs. If the guy crosses the Creek and doubles back, he can do as much harm there as to us – but it's a chance we'll all have to take. There's one shepherd gone up to the Saddle, and that's *it*."

Errol, who seldom spoke, stepped forward. "So. Let's hope we are the ones that find him."

"No kidding. All set?"

Nods all round.

"Hop!"

They headed, by ones and twos, well separated, for the gate to Holyroods'.

"Oh, Tom." Elsa looked at the row of dead, laid out at right angles to the road. "This is worse than Eugene." They walked along the road, escorted by Vernie and two of the grenadiers, who were now carrying swords and crossbows and looking older than they had two days ago.

"Likely not. We were working just one street; it was like that everywhere; and there had been more than a hundred thousand people just the week before."

"You're so effing *practical*. I hate it."

I know. Sorry."

"Since we're being practical, why isn't everyone all bloated, like that other time?"

"That was summer. We're having cold weather and cloudiness; it helps." He turned to Vernie. "How many?"

"Right here, right now, twenty-two of ours, eighteen of theirs. More died in the house, we think, and we haven't collected everyone from over by the Ridge yet."

"Aleesha's up there," put in Elsa. "She should have had a *life*, Tom."

"Everyone should have a life. We find ourselves born; then we make choices. Some work out to a longer life, some work out to a better one. Longer, as we both know, is not necessarily better."

"It's going to be too many for Hall, isn't it?"

"Yes," answered Dr. Chaney. "The heaps can only absorb so much. And in spite of the cold, corruption will certainly set in; we're going to have to do something different."

"Can we move them all up to one of the fields above Ames'?" asked Vernie. "You know; exposure, Indian way."

"Well, it's quite a concentration of putrefaction. There will be rain all winter, and Ames' is upstream of a lot of wells. I don't really know if that's an issue, but it makes me uneasy."

"Burial, then?" asked Elsa. "With funerals? Nothing lengthy; but when we all go back to Jeeah, a farewell seems appropriate."

"For ours, sure," replied Vernie. "But I'd just as soon give these bandits to the coyotes unsung and unremembered."

"No, give *them* a few words, too." They turned toward the voice. It was the tall girl with the crazy hair, in an antique cotton shift with no left sleeve, her arm bandaged from wrist to collarbone. She stood by the apple trees on the far side of the road, supported by Ro-eena.

"Karen!" Elsa was shocked. How could she be up so soon?

"Them, too; it was necessary to stop them, but we needn't be angry. That's a *waste*, you know."

"Ro-eena ..." Elsa began, warningly.

Ro-eena turned her head to Karen. "You're getting heavy. Back to Beeman's now? Before they beat me up for bringing you?"

"Yes."

Karen paused as they passed Cougar's corpse, next to Stannin's. The two looked very much alike.

...

Avery Murchison took a sip of water from the mug sitting in the cupholder of his Quickie chair.

He had not seen Savage Mary in years. At the time, he'd been an athletic and optimistic youth with legs, and she'd been a prematurely arthritic middle-aged scientist, dour and sardonic by turns, complaining of her being cooped up among so many "commies" – her father, a leading libertarian, would be rolling over in his grave, she'd said.

They hadn't taken to each other.

Now, perhaps, they were more alike. One chair-bound invalid being painfully rolled up a mountainside in an oxcart, to consult with another whose domain consisted of these lamplit warrens; the virtue of said warrens being their flat, smooth floors, the best place in Starvation Creek for a chair-bound would-be Marine to make himself useful.

As if there were such a thing as the Marines anymore.

She'd undoubtedly take over.

He rolled to the window facing north, and glassed in that direction out of habit; most of the "road" from Hall, and Hall itself, could not be seen from here.

For years, everything had been carried up on packframes or packsacks with tumplines, or dragged by travois; then finally oxen had become available, bred from the tiny herd of Devons that had been found at what was now Ames'. Rubber-tired trailers had been adapted, including one that had a tailgate labeled "Toy." Avery had wondered what kind of toy the trailer had carried in days gone by, until a chance remark by his mother cleared up the mystery. He had mused on that for days: *what other things are we forgetting?* What untapped knowledges would break when the first Creek generation is gone?

Billee ran in.

"Do you ever walk?" Avery asked.

"Huh! Don'tcha wanta know are they here yet?"

"I can deduce from your manner that they are."

"De-dues?" She knit up her eyebrows.

"Never mind. Are there enough people to get Dr. Mary up here?"

"She's a doctor?" Eyes widened.

"No, a physicist."

"What's that?"

"Cut that out. Can she get here?"

"Oh! Yeah, Millie and Bobbo, and two folks from Hall, and some guy with little windows over his face."

"Glasses. They help him see."

"No kiddin'? So, yah, it's gonna be noisy, but sit tight."

"Like I can do anything else. Go show them a lamp up the stairs, Mm? Thanks."

She skipped over to the door, leaned over the railing of the landing, and turned back. "They've got it covered, here they come."

It was quite a production, Mary being possibly the heaviest person on Starvation Creek. She could stand on her own, but getting her up each step involved having someone under each arm, with backups to make sure the group did not topple over backwards. Millie, a longtime Ridger, led the way with a candle, which she blew out as she reached the landing. Presently, Mary Savage, Ph.D. was sitting in her purloined wheelchair, huffing and blowing and darting mildly aggrieved looks round the room from between long pigtailed of pepper-and-salt hair.

"That 'road' out there is a killer, Junior. You ought to get it graded." Her eyes darted to the control panel even as she spoke.

"We do, every year. With a stone boat behind the oxen. Best we can do. And the name's Avery."

"Ooh, touchy. Well, that makes two of us. So what can you show us, here?" Selk came in and stood beside her chair.

"Lots. Or only a little, depending. And you are?" asked Avery.

"Selk; I do the radios and the generator and such."

"Oh, right. Dad has us listening to that car radio for you."

"How's it doing?"

"There are some interesting things coming out of the far north and some Spanish or Portuguese from far south; it's quiet for hundreds of miles around here, except for that station you asked about."

"Same broadcasts?" asked Mary.

"Yes; a loop, which suggests access to either computing power, or archaic tape technology, or both."

Mary and Selk were both impressed; Avery had more education in pre-Undoing knowledge than they had expected. Obviously Carey and Ellen had spent more time on teaching him than they had bothered to mention.

"Magee still looking for those names and numbers?"

"Well ... it's a recording. There might not even be anyone there. Without triangulation we can't even be certain the transmitter is in Roseburg. What we *do* know —" he added weight to his voice for emphasis — "is Guchi tells us the likely leader of our bandits, who is on the loose still, is a match for one of the names."

"Which one?" asked Selk.

"Wolf."

Karen awoke even more slowly than usual, swimming up from a dream of drowning. She was on a pallet on the floor, covered by a thin blanket. It was as well, as the room was not too cold. A number of other people were distributed around the floor, in rows, resting in like manner; their combined heat helped keep the place from freezing. She sensed there must be frost somewhere. Someone in the next room was alternately moaning and keening, and she could hear several high-pitched racking coughs, which were followed by wheezings. Elsa's tired voice drifted from the next room as well; perhaps trying to comfort the moaning one.

There was a pervasive odor of boiled plantains, opium, dried blood, urine, and feces. The house had become a hospital. Or perhaps a charnel house.

By her bedside she found Vernie Watkin, half asleep himself, seated on the floor with his back to the wall. The tunic sleeve of his left arm, near her head, had been rolled up, and an ointment, smelling of comfrey, had been daubed on a large area of red skin and blisters from hand to elbow.

Vernie sensed she had awakened, and opened his eyes to offer her a crooked smile. "So, enough beauty rest for the moment, hmm?"

"How long have I been asleep?" She tried to sit up, but her entire left side seemed to weigh her down, and a feeling like that in a banged elbow buzzed in her neck and shoulder.

"Oh, a few hours." He peered at her, worried. "An infection is setting in. Doc Chaney wants you to know we're -'placing a watch' on it."

"Uh-h?"

"You're strong, you've overcome losses before. Doc said I could tell you. We might have to shorten you up a bit." With his burnt hand, he pointed to her left side.

Karen turned her head. The bandages she remembered from the day before were gone. New ones had been put in their place; blood was seeping into the dressing. One of the unpleasant odors was her own.

A day of archery practice, at Ames Farm, came into her mind: standing in the deep shade of a spreading maple tree, reaching with her right hand for a cedar-shafted arrow tucked in the ground by her feet; nocking the arrow to the bowstring of the polished yew bow in her left hand; raising the bow as she drew the arrow to her right ear; estimating the windage and elevation, correcting, and letting fly; watching the singing passage of the arrow to the center of the butt at the other end of the sunlit pasture; listening to the 'thunk' that drifted back to her through the heat mirage off the hot grasses. As a murder of crows flapped by, cawing to one another over something – perhaps the

arrow – exultation had flooded Karen's whole being. She had almost defined herself entirely by her bow.

And now – her bow arm might leave her. Forever.

She swallowed hard, and, to fend off a rising terror, focused with all her might on her personal mantra: *do or say nothing which is of no use.*

She *had* volunteered, after all.

After a long moment, she looked at Vernie. His eyes were luminous, about to brim over.

"Vernie, never mind. If that comes, it will be just back to the drawing board for me. How is Tomma? And ... and Allyn?"

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Wolf crawled to the edge of the woods and examined the terrain above. A thin sheen of ice-covered rocks, bracken, and other stuff, glinting in the morning light – every leaf and stem, coated with rime, gave off a tiny rainbow. He took no interest, aiming all his senses at the place where the winding cart track dead-ended into the mountainside. With all the signs of recent foot, hoof, and even wheeled traffic the road bore, there could not *be* a dead-end here, and yet there was. So this must be an extremely well disguised entrance. Counterweighted, perhaps, or cantilevered. And no line showing in the vertical part there. If the locals had any sense that someone might come look at this, wouldn't they have had to abandon the road and put it to sleep? And then approach from different directions, covering their tracks thereafter? Instead they just trooped in and out, carelessly; a self-assured and complacent lot.

Such a door had to have been built before the road, during or before the Undoing, and was a sophisticated and enduring artifact which they had adopted but did not fully understand. The old man's story was therefore corroborated; at least so far as Wolf was concerned.

He knew these people had fast communications, and that search parties were beating the countryside for him in the valley below; there had to be some kind of alert lookout lurking. Perhaps that brat who had given them the slip. Time to go. *You get caught, what you know then becomes a liability rather than a trade item.*

Wolf slipped back as silently as possible through the viney maples and hazels until he was under the cover of the fir trees again. A green external-frame backpack, ancient as such a thing could be and not be too fragile, awaited him, with the AK, leaning against a tree. He'd found it at Hisey's and appropriated it, idly wondering what the logotype "REI" stood for, and loaded it with everything he thought might help get him out of this region alive. Here on Starvation Creek and Ridge were unimaginable riches – intact! – but they were guarded

by an idealistic and yet tenacious dragon, the community founded by the Murchisons. He'd have to find the means to slay the dragon. This probably meant heading for Roseburg and the man to whom he'd gone to school in prison there: Magee.

And there was not much to eat between here and Roseburg.

Wolf grasped the frame with both hands, lifted the pack to his knee, swung round and shrugged his massive arms through the padded brown straps, and buckled the padded hip belt. Its forty pounds seemed hardly a burden. Again he marveled at the things that had been made, back when there had been such a thing as factories. Reaching for the rifle, he walked away among the shadows.

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"All right, let's review." Mary wheeled herself round to face her host in *his* wheelchair. "Yesterday, we went over the control room and learned a few interesting things." She looked at Selk; this was his cue.

"Yes," he said, straightening himself up importantly. "This facility was electromechanical in nature, voluminous in size, well stocked at one time with provisions in barrels with 'U.S. Government' markings. On the top floor were dormitory rooms, refectories, a clinic, and an entertainment center. Four floors below that, of which this one is the deepest, consist of unfinished rooms, 'prox' one hundred meters long and thirty meters wide, ten high. Huge! It seems intended to have been staffed by up to fifty, and to be grid-independent and self-sustaining for a long period of time. Much of what was here, especially the barrels, was stripped in the early days of the Creek." He looked rather accusingly at Avery Murchison. "There was some kind of mandate, like that of the old 'missile silos'. Of that mandate, nothing much remains in print or by word of mouth, unless of course it's being kept under your parents' hat – or yours."

"What they know, if anything, which I doubt, they've never told me. But for what it's worth, I think they've simply kept up *their* mission – which was to protect it until relieved."

"And relief never came," put in Mary.

"Exactly."

"And we've looked things over upstairs, and we know that though there was a control room, there's not much sign now of anything to control – no missiles, anyway. But we'll get back to that. I wish Ro-eena was here; we need her as Recorder for this – umm, historic moment. Selk, proceed; a little less insultingly, though."

"We know that the entire place is wired for electric lighting, utility and communications, but the power for this was not drawn, as for the homes at Creek, from outside. There is a large diesel generator, vented to the outside, but from the way it is connected to the system I think it

is safe to say it was a backup system."

"Yes; my parents, with a few others, used it till it ran out of juice – which took three years."

"Beginning twenty years ago."

"Twenty-one."

"We can deduce from this, then, that there is another power source, not in use."

"That's what we're down here to see."

"Mmh," said Mary. "So, you've had years to look at that control panel up there. Any thoughts?"

"Not my specialty. Mom and Dad clearly had no idea. My job here has been to run the granaries and emergency storage for Creek, and maintain the control room as one of the lookouts. Not the best one, either. From Ball or Eagle's Nest we could *see*. From here we've always had to use runners – exposed lookouts, because there's so much dead ground between here and the angle of repose."

"Come again?" asked Selk.

"He means the hillsides swell out so that there's not much to see from here." Mary returned her gaze upon Avery's candlelit face.

"*'Controls A, B, and C are available.'* A lot of trouble to go to for three sets of verniers. From the markings on them, I think they were a manual backup to a computer controlled device."

"An override!" Selk stood on tiptoe and fairly crowed.

"To override what?" asked Avery, annoyed.

Selk spun around exultantly and faced Avery, triumphant. "Two of them set coordinates. The third one is a trigger, or like a speed or power control."

"Trigger?"

"For what?" asked Mary, amused.

"Well, *I* dunno; but I betcha it's a trigger. What would DARPA bury a small army in here for but a weapon?"

"Who's Darpa?" Avery felt he had been told, once; but the facility had not been discussed with him in this way.

"*'Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.'* They did all sorts of stuff. Invented the Internet, made raw medical plasma from chemicals, created robot warriors and nanospies. That's who your folks were working for."

"They were leading a Marine detail."

"And everyone walked away – except them."

"Well, the whole *valley* up and left – nothing was coming *in* any more, and nothing anyone knew worked without electricity or fuel. But Mom and Dad were told to stay put, so they did."

"Not only do I know that story," said Mary, "I was part of it – though I came later. Wasn't there an engineer who stayed with them?"

"Did. But he was going blind and early dementia setting in, so he

taught them everything he was willing to divulge, then retired."

"Retired! Who *retires* any more? I thought he died."

"No, he'd be at Hall with everyone else, I'd think. Not dead last I heard. But pretty close. He just hangs on and on."

"Would you be willing to send a runner down there right now?" asked Selk. "That could be important."

"I would." He wheeled round to face Millie, who was holding the candle. "Who's on?"

"It's still daylight topside. So it'd be Bee."

"Light us another couple of candles from that one and go dispatch her to Hall, inquiry Wilbur Angle, ET1, USN ret., please. With instructions to get him together with Carey Murchison, if possible."

"Sir!" She passed two lit tapers to Selk, and charged the dark stairwell behind them, casting ghostly shadows into the enormous room.

"For a kid who never had a U.S. Marines to sign on to, you're quick with the lingo," Mary remarked.

"Excuse me, for all I know, I was born into all that was *left* of the Marines. If the Murchisons are it, *I'm* it." Avery leaned forward, his jaw set.

Mary eyed the throwing knives in their sheaths on the arms of his chair. "Y'know, I think you got a point there. Two, even."

They smiled.

Avery wheeled round to face the far wall. He rolled away, beckoning with a tilt of his head. Mary rolled after him.

"About the candles ... " she wondered aloud.

"Yes, well, this is pretty stale air here, but there's lots of it. They should last awhile." He stopped.

"All right, here's what you're here for. Mr. Selk, if you'll hold your lights up high – thank you – you can see that there's a circle in the pavement here. The floor is basalt throughout Ridge, but right here there's concrete, eight feet across, with two iron rings set in it. And there's a crane, cable, winch, and hook set in the ceiling."

"Wow," said Selk, adjusting his glasses on the bridge of his nose with the back of his hand.

"And you can see that in the ceiling there is another such circle. They go all the way up four floors, in front of the main door, in fact. We've made a point of not stacking supplies on top of these lids, though we're not even sure why."

"I see there's nothing stored on this level," Mary observed, raising her candle as well.

"No. ET Angle said not to."

"ET?" asked Selk.

"Electronics Technician; that was his rating."

Mary peered at the floor and the ceiling and mused on what had just

been said. "It's a nuke."

"I would assume so."

Selk whirled round to Avery. "Is it ... ummm ... *safe* here?"

"Probably not over a long period of time, he told us. But the next level above is supposed to be okay."

Mary nodded. "Sure, kid. There's no steam pipes or anything, so it's not a fission reactor. Selk, what do you know about self-contained reactor units?"

"Gee, not much; I'm really ham radio and twelve volts."

"And most of that *I* taught you." She faced Avery Murchison. "Son, there's a steel bottle down there, I betcha, a little bigger than a pickup truck. Thorium is my guess. So the radiation here 'long as it's bottled up right, is beta particles. Mr. Angle gave you the straight skinny."

"If you say so; if I've ever read or heard of 'thoryum,' I've forgotten it."

"Well it's no magic bullet. I'd guess, from the size of the lid and the size of this place, what you have there, if it works, could run a really big house or really small neighborhood for decades. By itself, it's not a weapon. S'kinda like a catalytic heater." She reached into her ample bosom and fished out two odd-looking keys on cords around her neck. "So, about these."

Avery's expression darkened. "I'm surprised to see them."

"Your old man didn't tell you?"

"He said 'full cooperation.' So that's what you get."

"But you know what they are."

"I know that my dad wore one and my mom the other, all my life. I've never seen them anywhere else."

"Murch gave them both to me. To give to you, actually; though I'd love to see them tried out. I haven't seen Ellen lately, but I assume hers was fetched for the occasion." She hesitated. "We haven't seen any place to use them, so far in this tour."

"Well, you have come to the right place. Over this way." He wheeled over to the far wall, with his candle in his teeth.

Here there was a door like that in a bank vault, but smaller. There was a card lock with an override switch, a manual combination lock, and a latch consisting of a steel disk with three rods protruding from it, with black plastic knobs on them.

"Do the honors, Mr. Selk," said Avery, taking one of Selk's candles.

Selk put out his hand, tentatively, to the cardlock rocker switch.

"That's right. Throw that. We've no cards, but the switch works. I've seen it done. Good. Now on the combination wheels. Outer ring. Put that on 'seventeen'. Middle ring, 'seven.' Inner ring, 'six'."

"I'll be damned!" breathed Mary Savage.

"Yes, obvious enough. Now, Mr. Selk, rotate the bars to the left, or counterclockwise, half a turn."

Something clicked inside the door.

"Now give it a good heave toward you."

The door swung open easily, squealing slightly on its hinges.

Darkness yawned at them within.

"It's a smallish room," said Avery. "Let's roll in and have a look."
He handed the candle back to Selk and gripped the Quickie's tires.

The candles illuminated the chamber with an amber glow, as, for the first time in years, the Panel Room had visitors. Mary's eyes gleamed as she saw the two LED lights burning steadily, after all this time.

"What would be the significance of these?" asked Selk.

"So far as I know, they mean 'ready'. Are you?" Avery regarded him steadily.

"Yes."

Mary handed Selk one of the keys, and, taking the other, inserted it in one of the keyholes in the panel, at left. Selk imitated her action on the far right. The keyholes were almost three meters apart.

Mary tried hers to the left, but found no movement, so clicked it to the right. Selk clicked his to the right as well.

An impossible brilliance dazzled the three of them. Selk actually yelped and fell to the floor, his glasses clattering underneath Avery's chair and the candles skittering away. Behind them in the main chamber, more brilliance, like that of a roomful of suns, clicked on and hummed in chorus at them from the chamber beyond. Someone, up the stairwell or on the fourth level, screamed.

Slowly, Avery was able to open his eyes, and found Selk feeling about underneath the chair, his eyes still closed. Mary Savage, her fingers laced together in her lap, was squinting at Avery with a satisfied expression on her broad face.

"Welcome," she said, "to the world of Thomas Alva Edison."

"Uh?"

"Oh, pooh. I know you're educated enough to get that one. Anyways –" she cracked her knuckles – "this is gonna be *fun*."

∴ ∴ ∴

Days later, Dr. Tom leaned over Karen; his face wore a mixture of near exhaustion and professional kindness.

"You're a little woozy, but I'm afraid that's the best we can do. Your friends are here; they're going to get a good firm grip on you to help us. I will try to work very quickly. I'm going to give you this dowel to hold between your teeth. I want you to bite down on it *hard* and then let us know when to proceed. All right?"

"Uhh."

"Very good. All right, everyone? Ready, Karen?"

Vernie, Emilio, Errol, and Cal gave their assent and pulled.

Karen came near losing consciousness at the first pull on her left arm. It would have been a blessing, she knew. Yet she bit down on the wood with what strength she could muster, then gave a small, but determined nod.

If I'm ever going to cry, she thought, now might be a good time.

Book II

Abide the Fire

Every thing that may abide the fire, ye shall make to go through the fire, and it shall be clean. Num. 31:23

KAREN, SEATED to his right, looked Allyn over. His pale appearance, accentuated by his dark beard, filled her with concern. "Are you in good enough shape to *be* here? I ask," she added hastily, "because I'm pretty sure *I'm* not." She twisted her shoulder for emphasis, the pinned-up sleeve of her tunic serving as mute eloquence of her loss. "I'm still barely here – what's *left* of me."

"Oh, did I have the mulligugs?"

"If that means a long face, yes."

"Well, I suppose I should count my blessings. I have a few days' head start on you as to healing, plus I've still got part of each arm." Allyn waved his stumps in the air for emphasis. "Doc tells me these are going to be in good enough shape to fit up with praws soon."

"Praws?"

"Pross ... pross ..."

"Prosthetics?"

"Uh huh, prosthetic claws. A pair of hooks on each one. Not like tongs, but better than nothing, I suppose." The false cheer dropped suddenly from his voice. "What I'll miss most, I think," he said quietly, "is grafting at least for the next while."

"But meanwhile you *can* teach that. I'm no good for archery or pitching hay now – but there are things *I* can teach, too. I think." She shrugged, but her voice had dropped as well. There was no pretending what had happened could be taken lightly. Each realized that others would likely see them as diminished.

"Here" was Mess Hall at near capacity. The winter solstice had come and gone, and a light dusting of snow covered the fir and cedar branches beyond the windows, which fogged over in the breath of so many. There had been no General Meeting since the New Moon War, three months ago; who'd had time to attend one? Everything had to be done at once, day after day.

The war had killed, at final count, thirty-six Creekers, many from wounds that could not be adequately treated. There would have been more losses to "sour meat" had it been summer. And then the "whooping cough"—or whatever it was—had made off with sixteen more people, most of them children. So the population was down to one hundred thirty. Also, a Mr. Angle had died under suspicious circumstances; so, one twenty-nine.

So far. There were two or three wounded who might be "irrecoverable." Two had head injuries severe enough that Dr. Chaney might be directed, by vote of the GM, to offer them "mercy."

There were not going to be enough people to run the farms, Mess Hall, Ridge, and the patrols all at once – as if two hundred had been enough. This had always been so: never enough people to raise the

food: never enough food to feed the people.

Excepting Karen and the Perkins family, no one but armed bandits had entered into the valley in years; recruitment might be a thing of the past.

"Karen; Allyn." Tomma sat down beside Karen; Mrs. Ames eased herself into the chair next his. Tomma smiled. "You two are u-u-u-ggly."

"*Thanks*, Tomma; keep that up and we'll put some poison oak in your cast." Allyn made "stuffing" gestures, waving his sleeves.

Tomma raised his good arm and his plastered arm in mock alarm. "Oh, the horror. The horror!"

Mrs. Ames leaned forward to catch their eye. "He means he's very glad y'all two are able to be here."

"Yes, I meant that; that's what I meant, yes," Tomma grinned.

"Clown." Karen goosed him. "We're glad *you've* got both hands; you can fetch wood for us."

This conversation was carried on against a stream of voices; almost a hundred people, including cooks and servers, were assembled, leaving skeleton crews at Ridge, Common Farm Number One, and Ball Butte, as well as seeing to the needs of stock at farms along the Road.

But sound diminished suddenly, as a stretcher was brought in and carried up onto the platform. A bar of wood had been fixed across the stage; the handles at one end of the stretcher were jammed against this and the other handles raised and propped against a frame so that Carey Murchison, practically a ghost of his former self, could face the Meeting. He offered a wan smile, which brought tears to many; he was now in the final stages of leukemia.

Seated in chairs on the platform, also facing the room, were Doc Chaney, Elsa Chaney, Mrs. Lazar, Maggie, and Savage Mary.

Ellen Murchison, whose hair had gone much grayer, got up from one of the front-and-center tables and made her way painfully and slowly to the platform as well, wearing a house robe and leaning heavily on a cane. She took the chair they'd placed for her by her husband's strange perch, and reached into the stretcher to pat his hand.

Tom Chaney waited till Ellen had settled herself. "Are we all here that can be here?"

"All but Wilson Wilson, who's been out to Eagle's Nest," offered Vernie, who had come in late and taken a seat between Mrs. Ames and Errol. "He should be here before the morning's over."

"Sounds good; shall we call it a quorum, then?" Tom looked over the room.

Heads nodded; no voice spoke in opposition.

"All right, then. Cal, will you record in writing?"

"I will," affirmed Mr. Perkins. He sat with Mrs. Perkins, who was

fully recovered from her wounds, down front. Their children, veteran fighters now in their own right, sat proudly on either side of them.

"And Ro-eena, to call speakers in turn?"

"I am," she said. She rose and stood by the stage, turning so as to face both platform and room.

"All good," said Tom. "Cal, please note we are met in GM at Mess Hall, early Sunday morning, January 29, 2051. Do we have an agenda?"

Mary turned toward Tom. "Yes; and I believe Avery's passed on it as well."

"And we'll be on the phone to him from time to time for his votes, especially if there are any close ones. Okay, agenda, please."

Cal rose in place, faced the room, and read.

"One. Interim decisions by Committee up for GM review. Two, request from Bledsoes' to reopen inquiry into the death of Huskey, Bledsoe."

This gave rise to impatient gestures from several of the veterans. The Bledsoes, it was felt, should give it a rest.

"Three, health report, disposition of dead, irrecoverable cases report and request, and a request from Tom Chaney for apprentices, with a view to ... giving up his practice."

A murmur of mild shock ran round the room. This was not unexpected, but a community almost always looks more than half backward, and so bumps into its future.

"Four, Membership offer to Karen, Ames; Emilio, Ames, Sponsor."

Emilio, sitting with Juanita Molinero and their sons, smiled and nodded across to Karen.

"Five, reports from patrols. Six, State of the Farm reports, with stock, field, food, water and fuel inventories and a request for guidance on the disposition of Wilson Farm and Beeman Farm, and possibly others, due to war damage and depopulation. Seven, report from Ellen Murchison on defense and state of the armory. Eight, request from Carey Murchison to step down from Committee of Elders."

Heads nodded; no surprise there.

"Nine. Request from Committee of Elders for new members, and a change of conditions for membership in said Committee. Ten, transportation report and animal welfare. Eleven, construction and water transport report, with a request for undershot wheels for the Creek. Twelve, results of inquiry into the death of Wilbur Angle at Hiseys', with collation to the reports from patrols."

Uh-oh. Many heads turned, many eyes met. The rumor that Mr. Angle, the blind and demented former nuclear engineer, had died at the hands of the mysterious escapee named Wolf, appeared confirmed. What might be the ramifications?

"Thirteen, request from Avery Murchison and Mary Savage for reorganization to take advantage of notable developments at Ridge, especially in light of the results of the inquiry per item twelve."

This created a stir. Best for last, indeed. Or worst. Everyone at the Creek had known that change might come, but this sounded like major change. How many might have to give up their present homes and affiliations?

"Well. Thank you, Cal." Tom leaned back in his chair. "I think we can safely say this will be a three-day GM. Everybody's had breakfast?"

There was general assent, but already some began looking at their empty cups and bowls with regret.

"Kitchen is prepared to keep us topped up as needed; just get Guchi's attention over by the door there – right, Mr. Guchi? – something will come round. And for calls of nature, we have a five-holer here, so just come and go; or rather, go and go."

This weak gibe released a surprising amount of tension; when the laughs subsided, Tom went on.

"But do come back. These agenda items don't have to be taken in order as they were added, necessarily. Item Two, for example, can await the arrival of Wilson, Ridge. So, any additions to the agenda at this time? – noting that we can add items any time between now and wrap-up."

He waited a bit, then said over the sound of a few dishes and utensils in use, "Okay, shall we begin with Item One?"

Emilio raised his hand and pointed to Ro-eena. She pointed back at Emilio and called on him. Several other hands appeared as well, and she pointed to each of them in recognition, to be called on in turn; if their business was pertinent to the item in question, they might speak. If something prior to their turn made their contribution irrelevant, they might say, "pass," yielding to Ro-eena's next speaker. Karen was familiar with this process, which she'd heard had been concocted by Elsa and Ellen, at the Farm level. But this was her first GM; she'd be interested to see how it worked with over a hundred participants.

Emilio stood and gestured over to Karen. "Respectfully, Committee and Meeting. I move that we give first consideration to Item Four, as we have a non-voting attender who by rights should become a voting member. Karen Rutledge has been called Karen, Ames almost since day one, and as we all know has given much in peace and much, almost her all, in war."

Tom, both pleased and amused, spoke. "Motion on the floor to offer membership to Karen Rutledge. Discussion, keep it to the motion. May I say, Emilio, you've done most of your discussion already in the guise of so moving."

A number of people laughed good-naturedly. Emilio sat, mildly

embarrassed. Ro-eena pointed to Maggie, a thin woman with a long nose, on the platform. She wore buckskin, with a shot pouch and powder horn on crossed leather belts.

"Oh," said Maggie. "I had something else. But I support the motion. Otherwise, pass."

Many hands were waving. Ro-eena looked as if she might pop a sweat keeping everyone straight in her head. She pointed to two more, who passed, then to Marcee.

Marcee, who had been eventually rescued from the Wilson outhouse by the young grenadiers, had been through a couple of months of nightmares and flashbacks, but had begun to pull herself together. She was now with child, a natural consequence of her ordeal, and the hormonal changes had settled her somewhat. Also, the fact that she was growing four new fingernails was lost on no one. Her opinions, as a veteran and incipient mother, had begun to carry weight. She rose, a bit slowly in her long, loose robe, to her feet. Her appearance in the Mess Hall was striking; she and Ro-eena were the only two redheads.

"Well, I wanted to speak about even bothering to do Item Two, as I'm a witness in the case. But what I have to say about that is pertinent to the motion."

Marcee turned to face Karen. "I could see through the cracks in the wall where they'd put me, when you and Huskey opened up on those bastards. I saw what happened, and I – I'm just grateful. I think I'm alive today because of what you did, and I think everyone here is alive today because of what you did. I'd give you my left arm if there was a way to do it. So, uh, Chair, I support the motion."

Marcee sat down suddenly, still looking over at Karen. Karen did not know how to receive or return so much emotion. She settled for offering Marcee a brief smile, then turned her attention to Ro-eena, who was both calling on another speaker, and gamely fielding many more speakers-in-waiting.

The young shepherd from Beemans' that Ellen remembered shooting at coyotes stood up in the back. There were so few left at Beemans' that he was probably the current senior resident.

"Uh, y'know, I, uh, argue in favor, so that makes three not countin' Mr. Emilio, an' I call th' question."

"All right," said Tom. "I'm not sure that's procedurally done, but – discussion against the motion?"

There was none.

"All pass?"

Heads nodded. Ro-eena was relieved; she could let go the long list of names in her head, and begin anew with the next item.

"Cal, what's the motion as recorded?"

"That we offer citizenship – I mean, membership – to the young

lady."

Tom winced. "Close enough. 'Young lady' is recorded as 'Karen Rutledge, guest, formerly of Davis, California'?"

"Uhh, yeah."

"Favor?"

A thundering "Aye" shook the room.

"Nays?"

Silence.

"Abstentions?"

"Abstain." This was one of the Bledsoe crew. Some of his neighbors glared at him; he crossed his arms and ignored them.

Tom stood up. "Karen Rutledge, rise, please."

She did so, a bit awkwardly, as she was still finding her balance with her newly lopsided body.

"We haven't even managed to cover this with you properly; but there's not much to it. You'll have attended meetings of your host Farm, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the outcomes of votes, after discussion, are binding on *members* of each farm. It's the same at Creek level. Basically a guest may attain privileges and attend Meetings but not vote; a member of the Creek may attain rights and the vote, but shares equally with all other members in responsibility for and to the Creek as to decisions made by the GM or interim decisions made by the Committee of Elders, subject to ratification by the GM."

He peered at her. "Did you get all that?"

"I think so, sir. 'As above, so below.'"

"An interesting construction. Yes, the short version of all that," grinned Tom, "is, you agree to abide by the outcomes of all votes in quorum. Our ass is your ass and vice versa."

"Tom!" Elsa remonstrated. Carey Murchison, who'd had nothing at all to say up till this point, snorted amiably.

"Well, I don't really know a better way to put it." Turning back to Karen, he put the question to her. "This offer as it now stands, if I'm reading Emilio right, is of both Creek and Ames membership, by the way. How say you?"

"I accept. Both. Thank you all." She sat down, her face for once reddening, and dropped her hand in her lap.

Mrs. Ames fairly leaped across Tomma to embrace her – carefully. The room erupted in cheers around them.

"Now, don't let's get too carried away, folks. Nice beginning to a long, long day." Tom turned to Cal. "Record as member of Creek and member of Ames, Karen, Ames." He sat down. "Speakers now keep to the ordering of the agenda, please. Ro-eena, next hand."

"Yes, sir."

Many hands were already eagerly vying for her attention.

...

The light snow was followed by heavy rain. Karen stood, with her hand resting on the back of her neck, watching the muddy drops rebound from snowmelt beyond the grimy windows of Hall. She was never happy to see snow anyway – there had been entirely too much of it in her life, those two winters in the Lassen Peak area. That thought led to another: of all these people here, how many would have even *heard* of Lassen Peak? Or would care, if they were told? Was there even an atlas here, or – too much to hope – a globe? She'd offered to teach Raul and David to read, but they had simply given her that wall-eyed look, and Juanita had not really been encouraging. And what, in the house, had there been to teach from? It was all well and good to say, with the *Five Rings*, that one must live without prejudices; she'd seen how to apply this in war, but in peace she sometimes found herself spinning her wheels.

"Now who's got the mulligugs?" asked Allyn, who'd come up beside her.

"Oh! Well, I was thinking, on the whole, I prefer the rain to the snow."

"Ah. We do have a lot of rain in winter here, and usually not much snow, though two years ago there was a whomper."

"I know. I *was* out in it."

"Bite my head off."

She checked; he was smiling.

Well, that's unfair, she said to herself. *So quit your whining*. She turned to face him, her hand on her hip. "Okay, the mulligugs. You caught me. You know, I'm kind of a neither here nor there thing. I grew up with *books* from a world that's not there any more. And I guess I – I miss something I never had."

"You keep a lot bottled up, don't you?"

"Do you know the phrase, 'rhetorical question?'"

He grinned. "Caught *me*. But I can glimpse some of what's bothering you in the context of the GM."

"The GM?"

"Mm-hm. The old guard is wearing out. We don't have the Murchisons and the Chaney's for much longer, and Savage Mary is no spring chicken. And the five of them are that world you were raised for, *slipping away even as you get here*. Not even Mary's apprentices fully appreciate her. That hotshot on wheels up on the Ridge is like a cracked mirror – he reflects only some of what his parents were about, not all. And the rest is gone forever, maybe. Y'know –" he raised his stumps in a shrug, embarrassed. "– I, umm, ah, I'm kinda nuts about

you, in my way, and I know everybody at Ames' is, in their way, but, uhhhh, right now you just maybe oughta ask yourself, 'do I really wanta go back to Ames Farm?'"

"What?" Karen was taken aback.

"Oh, c'mon, that's not like you. You're all about non-attachment. Think it through. You're loyal to Ames', you've just signed on to Ames', and with good reason. But will you serve them best by hanging around that barn meditating on how to milk that cow one-handed?"

"Damn." She covered her eyes and hunched her shoulders. "Damn!"

"This 'man' bothering you?"

They turned. The big guy with the eyebrows from Bledsoe's that had pressed the matter about Huskey was standing a little too close. His arms hung by his sides, and he opened and closed his fists.

Karen took her hand from her eyes, which were glistening. "No! In fact, he's being very sweet, so go give us a little air. Please?"

"Huh. Suit y'selves." He moved away, glancing back at them over his shoulder.

Allyn watched him away, then returned his attention to her. "Nicely handled. But I think there's going to be a lot of that. 'Man' said that way means I'm less of one now. S'pose I could try to kick him but he kicks harder, I think. Umm, so, I hurt ya?"

"No, *truth* hurts. So, what are you saying? Go look for Mary and get an apprenticeship?"

"Only if it's what you want. And now, of course, you'd have to have Ames vote it." He grinned.

A thin, catlike girl of about thirteen walked up to them. Sandy-haired, with braids, yet with eyes like Guchi's, she was wearing her duty tunic and jerkin and had one of the little swords tucked in her belt. On her left arm she wore an archer's armguard. She looked like someone "on duty."

"Hi, can I interrupt? It's from the Captain."

"Well, I'd guess you'd better, Billee," said Allyn, amused. He took a half-step back.

The girl focused on Karen. "I've been hopin' to meet ya. All kinds of stories! All true, I bet! So, the message is, can ya join some folks at their table? It's downstairs."

"Oh. Umm, sure." she looked back to Allyn. He made little jerks with his head, meaning "go, go" – with a knowing smile.

As they walked across the crowded room together, Billee eyed Karen's shoulder. "Whacked ya good, huh? I got chased but I got out of it, lucky me, they woulda double-whacked me, ya-yah."

Karen was not sure where "double-whacked" came from, but she found this young person refreshing. "Well, I was 'double whacked', here –" She pointed at the empty air where her upper arm would have

been – "and here. And it went sour, both places. Could happen to anybody. You're Billee, from ... ?"

"Ridge. That guy who was tryin' to loom all over yez, try an' keep him outta your line of sight; Huskey was married to his *sister*, and she's egging him on to get'n *trou-u-u-ble*, yah? yah-yah." They came to a dim stairwell, leading down. "Right down here, at the bottom, second right."

"Um. Thank you."

Karen found the room without difficulty; the door was open and the yellow light of a single taper streamed into the dingy hallway. She put her head around the corner and saw Savage Mary, Tom Chaney and Ellen Murchison sitting at a small table.

"Come on in!" Mary, a heavysset woman in black braids shot with gray, fairly boomed. She sat in a gunmetal gray folding chair, as did the others; the wheelchair in which Karen had previously seen her sulked in its corner. In the other corner, Karen could see a small cot; in it lay Sgt. Carey Murchison, USMC, attended by Elsa Chaney.

Mary offered her a seat with a gesture. "Well, girl, you've led me a merry chase. Been here since last summer, almost, and finally we meet."

Karen sat down, her hand resting on her right thigh. Was this an "interview?" – she wondered. Should she, perhaps, have washed her face and brushed her hair? Not that it could make any kind of difference; everyone was getting remarkably grungy. But she felt "on" – scrutinized.

"Sad about that arm, huh?" Mary observed.

"Mnh? What's here *now* is what's here now. Ma'am."

Carey chuckled from deep within his pillow. "Told you, didn't I?"

Mary's eyebrows went up, and her face split into a surprisingly engaging grin.

"*Great* answer; confirms just about everything. Tell me, if you would, a little about your upbringing. The 'basement' story, absent any of the stuff that came later. Daily routine, 'specially."

Karen talked, haltingly at first, and then as memories arose that had become hazy to her, added details. These details interested Mary: the small library of several hundred books and several hundred *National Geographics*, with some other magazines; her father's geography lectures using a world globe, a candle, and an old baseball; the fitness routines incorporating evasion, judo, knife, bow, and pistol with snap caps, sometimes blindfolded.

"What was that bit again about the handful of pencils?"

"He'd found a box of pencils and sharpened them all, then talked about light. There was an old calendar with a lot of blank paper on the back of the sheets, and he took one of these and held all the pencils straight up and down, and made dots." Karen imitated the move with

her hand above the table. "Then he said, 'measure the distance between two of the dots.' So I did, and then he held the pencils at an angle, like this –" Karen swept a slanting chop at the tabletop – "and made dots, and I measured those and they were farther apart. And he said this was why it's hot in summer and cold in winter."

"And you got it?"

"Well, yes, ma'am, because of the baseball and the globe. The earth is like a gyroscope, spinning on a tilt, and when the northern hemisphere is toward the sun, on this side of the orbit –" she circled the tabletop with her finger – "The dots, that is, the photons, hit closer together, and transfer higher heat because there are more of them. You get summer in the southern hemisphere and winter in the northern hemisphere, because the photons in the northern hemisphere are landing farther apart; less heat. That's also why crops mature faster on south slopes in the northern hemisphere and north slopes in the southern."

"Can you relate that to anything practical around here, other than that the fields on the north side of the Creek are the ones that get the long-season crops?"

"Umm – well, you have those little wind machines in the low ground for raising water on the farms. That works because south slopes in the mountains heat up and the air rises, drawing wind up the Creek on a predictable schedule. Then in the evening the cooling air sinks and goes back down the Creek, so you get enough traction in the wind machines to pump water all day. But only because they can swing on their vanes and face both ways."

Mary waved her hand magisterially. "And this is reliable in the drought season when we need it most, and is the main reason we've been able to farm here with so few people. Goodness knows we needed *something* in our corner; the soil up in here being no better than it is."

She tapped the table in the spot where Karen had pantomimed the calendar page. "I admire your father, Miss, all the more as you say he had little formal training. Autodidacts sometimes see better than the rest of us. What impresses me *most* is that he bothered to explain to you about the *provisional* nature of straight lines and spheres, and the *provisional* nature of naming and classification. Even *scientists* in my day tended to be brought up short by that stuff."

"I'm not sure *I* get it even now," put in Tom.

"Well, it's not very pertinent to matters in hand at the moment. The take-home message is that this slip of a madwoman warrior is the second most educated person on the Creek – and not a bit stuck up about it." She returned her attention to Karen.

"Now we get to some potentially painful nitty-gritty. I would imagine, based on hearsay, observation, and discussion, that the good

folk at Ames' are highly attached to you and vice versa."

"They've been very good to me."

"And you to them, and to us all, though Ellen here would say that only sets a standard any and all of us should meet every day. You know that Mr. Errol, that nice, quiet, introverted and, though he does not seem to realize it, brilliant fellow, was at 'Savage Mary's' before he was at Ames' – woodworking was his thing, and we farmed him out where he was needed, which was the east end of the valley, so there'd be quality woodworking on the woodsiest farms – yours, Allyn's and so on. Same with Allyn, he trained in plant biology – as much of it as we still knew how to teach."

Ellen shifted in her seat, visibly tired, but game. "It's a scheme to get Mary's little stock of civilized knowledge spread around. Safer."

"A security measure. Pour it into their hard heads while they're young," agreed Mary. "Now, here's the thing. I don't wanna *scare* ya, but in five year's time, if the Kluxers south of here leave us alone – fat chance – and "Jeeah" does her usual thing in the usual time, everybody in this room, except *you*, GWATCDR, will be dead."

"GWATCDR?"

"God Willin' And Th' Crick Don't Rise. We *will* have created some specialists, but there will be no more *generalists*."

"Ma'am, I do think you are 'scaring' me."

"That's my girl, if it didn't, some, this would be an unproductive conversation. Now, here's the deal. Up on that big ugly hill there –" Mary waved at the wall behind Carey – "there's an observation deck and dormitory, beneath which are four one-room floors, each the size of a small Wal-Mart – you know what those were?"

"Yes; I've seen a couple of them; what was left of them, that is."

"Underneath the lowest level, there is a functioning 'nuclear battery'. Some such thing. It's got enough oomph to give us fifty or so kilowatts of free power, day and night, for maybe two decades. We talked about this in the GM, as you may remember; and recommended to move my operation up there and do a crash manufacturing program in agricultural tools and 'other handy stuff.'" She looked over at Ellen, who nodded slowly. "We might need most of that capacity, in the early going, for the armory. On the other hand, things could go hunky-dory, and then we find other people like us, and then there's *trade*. Trade would be a wonderful thing; imagine having *salt*."

Tom looked across at Mary. "Or other varieties of food crops. Pigs. Dogs. Access to more horses. Cotton goods. Most of all, medicines."

"Or most of all, *olive oil*. I'm looking at Miss Karen as we say these things, Tom; she's not all that enthused yet," Mary noted.

"It does sound like there's going to be a lot to do ..." Karen offered, tentatively.

"Well, here's the thing. What I'm leading up to is, that little treasure

up there puts us on the horns of a dilemma. We want what it can do, but it's going to be addictive. A generalist, which I, a ductility specialist, have tried to be all these years, is what's wanted."

A small white moth – where could it have come from, in January? – flitted across the space between them and guttered its little life out in the candle flame. Karen kept her attention on Mary.

Mary, suddenly all seriousness, put both fat hands on the table, age spots showing in the candlelight. "We want to know if you would be willing to pick up, with us, where your *dad* left off. Do some time grokking how to *survive* the temptations that gizmo up there will lead us into."

"Well ... do you mean – studying – about how to extend the technology or how to switch back to artisan culture?"

Carey stirred in the cot again. "Told you!" Elsa patted his arm.

Mary leaned back, grimacing a little as her spine complained, in the uncomfortable chair. "Yah, Murch, you sure did. Ah, *love* that question. It's the grittin' nitty. 'K, we figure, both. You trained on bows and guns. Visualize, if you will, a small army, or, better, a garrison, that's pretty good at bows. Now suddenly they're all about guns. This lasts half a lifetime, then – kaplooie! No more guns, gotta go back to bows and be good at them from day one, and good at making them, with hand tools. With flies in their faces. Squatting around a fire."

"It would be hard for them."

"Yes, young ma'am, it will be hard for them." Mary cupped her hand round the taper, and pantomimed blowing it out.

"The light of civilization will go out, and there we'll all be, as ignorant of how to do things *without* it as we are now of how to do things *with* it. Got a book for you here, a real oldie, over a hundred years old, I think – ever read *Earth Abides*?"

"I think I saw mention of it somewhere."

"Diplomatic. Here it is; tell me what you think of it in a week or so. Now ... as those of us in the room see it – correct me if I'm wrong, gang – there'll be two phases. We have to outlive our Kluxers and your Eastside Eaters – gods forbid they should get together – whose notions of civilization depend on testosterone and skin whiteness. They're Avery's job; he's a specialist, he'll be th' *war* chief, with help from Mr. Wilson and Mr. Molinero, among others. We'll need some decent high tech for that scenario. There's a lot of good stuff stockpiled yet; down th' line, won't be down the line. Metallurgy, gunsmithing, pyro, maybe optics, communications, organization, training; these are still possible.

"Then, th' fancy resource base falls out from under us. The Creek gets through alive, then we have to give most of it up gracefully. We dumb down our electrical applications so that the things we continue to do along that line can be done without mass production – go to

artisanal, just as you say. But we foresee a rough transition. Someone who lacks most of the usual prejudices about entitlement will need to goose us along. That's the *peace* chief.

"Just so it doesn't go to your head, honey, we're not talking about promoting you all the way to the head of the class this morning. But we think you're as good trainee material for that job as anybody we have in this mudhole. Like to look into it?"

"Umm. Well, there's Ames', you see."

"Sure. Damn good start. We were just talking with Mrs. Ames; she, along with Elsa, Murch and Tom, *nominated* you. So, there will be a meeting, and a vote, and hugs and tears and all that, and you'll come home once a week and sleep in your old bed and they'll all fuss over you."

"Oh."

"Oh', she says. You know we talked in the GM a bit about contracting the acreage, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"We gotta find an alternative to this *ma'am* thing. Well, Mrs. Ames is upstairs breaking it to the other Ames kids, and what's left of the Wilsons and Beemans, that they need to pack up and migrate west."

"You're breaking up Ames?"

"I'll overlook that *'you're'*, we're *trying* not to be authoritarian around here. This will all go to a vote later today, when we're back in plenary. Unless there are any surprises, Ames' will stick together and take over 'Savage Mary's'. That's your likely new 'home place,' and, if you so say, Ridge will be your choice of 'university.'"

Mary looked into Karen's hesitant young-old face, with the freckles round her nose. *So tentative with friends, so decisive with foes. Scary kid! But probably my one shot at having a child of my own.*

"So, are ya in?"

"I could ... try it? I mean, I've never even seen Ridge."

"We'll take that as a *provisional* 'yes.'"

Mary grinned. "Like straight lines, spheres, morals, meaning, and the preferences of cats."

⋮

Josep walked point.

Marleena, who'd been tracking the new wolf pack, had smelled a *burn*. So early in the year, it could not be a forest fire. A tendril of spring breeze, with just a hint of someone's breakfast smoke, had curled itself round a hill, then wreathed across the unoccupied valley to the south, and lapped at the boundary ridge. So it had to be investigated.

Josep took four men with him, all that their tribe could spare, each laden with enough pemmican to get through several days. If it turned

out to be nothing, they could look for venison on the way back. Fall venison was much preferred, but no one at Roundhouse would turn down venison at any time. Life had been hard.

Josep, slim and golden-haired with a suggestion of golden beard, still had a bounce in his step and cockiness in his eye after the winter, which came partly from his youth and his upbringing, and partly from his habit of finding and eating green things even in the dark of the year. If he felt "scurved" and nothing else was available, he would ask Marleena to make up some fir-needle tea for him – which she would do, scolding and fussing, saying that no good could come of drinking from a tree anyone could smell was poisonous.

As the sun reached down through the gray murk, with another moon of winter to go, the people of Roundhouse had begun to shake loose the cold and to speak with a little more cheer – another winter survived, the Lord be praised. And as they padded along the animal trails across the hills, the men limbered up in spite of themselves. With so much new foliage curling from the buds, and robins and other spring birds already at hand, lilting in the sprouting branches, whose was the heart so sodden with rain that he would not respond?

But no one whistled. Danger always lurked around the bends in this world.

The chief danger was Man; all at the Roundhouse knew that. Had they not come together from disparate remnants of pilgrim bands that had been preyed upon and harried the length of the Highway of Death? And each group that had come in had given up tales of horrors – corroborated by several attacks that had reduced their numbers. The few firearms had gone silent, one by one, and the new tribe had perforce leaned to make and use bows and other tools of distant memory. But it had been almost twenty years now; a way of life had coalesced and there had been no new attack for almost a decade. Yet memory of loss and suffering is long. The few children were still told tales of an evil people that had gnawed their way upriver from Port Land and destroyed the outlying farms.

A huge barn, built of cement on a circular pattern, with a metal roof, had been the tribe's salvation. The Port Landers were ill provisioned and had spent themselves and their ammunition against the thick round wall. This blessed fort, with the hole knocked in the center of the roof for the smoke from the Fire, had become home, as there was room in it for all the valley's survivors of that war. Some there were, now, who hunted, fished, farmed, and patrolled, and had never known a home besides the Roundhouse. One of those, even now, the youngest of their party, trailed in Josep's wake.

Ranging ahead of Josep, loping along on long legs and circling back from time to time to report her satisfaction with the journey's offerings, a glorious creature served as the party's "point man." In

former times she might have been identified as half Irish Wolfhound and half Golden Retriever. With her nose for business she increased the party's efficiency a thousandfold. Named Krall, for the way she had ingratiated herself, dragging along on her belly from child to child in the Roundhouse, tail thumping, she was everyone's favorite scout.

A brief reconnaissance of the South Valley, which was known ground, showed that no one had taken up residence in the ruined and collapsed houses and barns, or the many fields which had grown up into tangled woods of fir, ash, and maple. Someone had gone through all the buildings long ago, and systematically emptied them out. Leery of ever meeting these people, who must surely have been numerous, the Roundhouse tribe had kept their visits to the place minimal. The vague hope faded that perhaps a lone traveler or small band had made the reported smoke. A decision must be made.

Josep called a parley and the men gathered together to speak quietly among themselves in a deep thicket of hawthorns, shrouded in old-man-vine. All around them, swallowtail butterflies flitted – it was too early for swallowtails, but that was the way with everything – each year, insects, plants, and all kinds of birds and animals did something sooner than anyone remembered seeing it done. It was as if the great flat world were tilting itself more and more toward the sun, and summer would someday last all year.

Krall curled in and out among them, fretting – she had crossed the spoor of the wolves. These were not counted a danger. Josep strung his bow, nonetheless, and pulled his fingerless deerskin glove onto his right hand. The others, silently observant, did the same.

"I am for going to the top of the next hill, for once," asserted their young leader. "All these years we have not looked there. Our ignorance of the place springs from a just caution, but it is as dangerous as knowledge, and over time, becomes the more dangerous of the two."

"It is so," said the next man, Bolo. A bigger, older, and not unwise handyman, dark brown, with a long brown beard streaked with red and a bush of dark brown hair on his head, with gray at the temples, Bolo might in earlier times have been labeled autistic and left to subsist in some den on food stamps and old movies. But at Roundhouse he had a life, and knew, from things his parents had said to each other, his good fortune. Always he agreed with the younger Josep, but, as Josep was a far-seeing youth, this seldom led Bolo into error.

The others were less enthused, but no game had crossed their path to distract them from the present mission, and among the men, more so than among the women of the tribe, there remained something of a thirst to see the world. They agreed to push on.

Late in the day, crossing amuddy opening among the fir trees that

was populated with small, gnarly willows, the party came upon the crest of the ridge, among rhododendrons and bear grass. The hill was wooded on the south as well as the north and offered little in the way of a view. But, as here the best human nose among them did detect the hint of smoke that had alerted Marleena, Josep elected to climb an open-grown fir – it had retained its lower branches and could serve as a ladder. Propping his bow against it, he vanished into the tree's canopy, while Krall whined her annoyance at Josep's disappearance until shushed by Bolo.

The sun had made its way within two hands of the horizon when Josep, sweating, scratched, and spattered with resin and flakes of bark, descended among them.

What had he seen, they all wished to know.

Wondrous things.

The whole valley to the south of them appeared inhabited. There were farms! Perhaps four times as many as the Roundhouse people had once had; maybe more. The fields were small, as at Roundhouse, but surrounded by cultivated hedges; they radiated from a cart track that followed a small river. Furthermore, in most of the fields there were small windmills! – he had watched, amazed, their white sails flitting in the evening breeze. Far to the left there was a long, low building, with activity around it, and traffic of some sort – could it be oxen?! – between there and an obscure place, already in evening shadow, on the mountain to the south. The mountain was much bigger than the one on which they stood, and was bare at its summit. Smoke trailed east from at least ten valley chimneys into the high hills; some spring eddy must have taken it out of its normal way, betraying, for once, the complacent anonymity of the place.

"With so much farming, it may be these are a friendly people," Josep observed. "Perhaps we should sleep here, and try to speak to someone in the morning."

But to such an abrupt and momentous decision none of the others, save Bolo, could assent. This matter must be brought to the Fire at Roundhouse. Then, if it was the will of the tribe, a return journey might be made, with an offer of parley. Josep could see the wisdom of this view, and easily assented. But in some corner of his heart, his patience was thin. So much might be learned! Trade might even now be initiated; and the high tide of poverty at Roundhouse might begin to recede at last.

As one, they melted away into the shadows.

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Tomma and Vernie each seized one end of the long handles of the log tongs.

Horses and oxen were needed elsewhere, as the spring weather had come early and stayed long. The gardens were not plowed, but planted from hothouse starts through a yearlong mulch of straw, to conserve water. Such methods were not practical at field scale, and those in charge of barley, oats and wheat favored the traditional moldboard plow, harrow, and manure cart. If weather favored the field hands, as it did this year, the woods hands must supply their own labor unaided.

The tongs, like a pair of ice tongs, consisted of two long hooked bars of iron, joined together like a pair of scissors, suspended from a wooden rod that extended three feet on each side. Any fir tree from the lower slopes of Maggie's Hill, less than a foot in diameter, might be fair game. It would be cut down with a pair of axes and limbed, then de-barked with an iron "spud," a kind of large chisel on a long handle like that of a hoe, so that the log would slide easily. Two loggers would choose and cut a tree together, then one would limb while the other rested, and the other would spud while the first rested, and then, with the tongs, they would skid the tree down to one of the farms, to be added to a pile near the sawbuck.

In this way were loggers warmed out of doors in all weather, and the farmers and families warmed in the kitchens.

Larger trees were left until a team of oxen could be assigned to the task. New land for farming, should enough labor be found to do it, was added to the Creek's inventory in this way.

"Left! Go left, dang it!" said Vernie in exasperation.

"I am!" replied Tomma. "Just do it; I'll stay with you."

"I can never tell if you're going to, that's the trouble."

"S'cuz I'm taller and don't take as many steps."

"Well, bully for you. Oka-a-y, we're going through these huckleberries here, then slip over the ash log and down to the hedge."

"I'm there; step high, Vernie, there's trailing blackberry all through here."

"Save your breath."

"Let's sit down and I'll *catch* my breath."

They dropped the tongs and sat in the sunshine. Below them, folks at Maggie's were hitching the big Belgian to a new tooth harrow; far to the right, new smoke rose from the kitchen at New Ames', formerly known as Savage Mary's.

"Mrs. A. and Mrs. M. have started dinner," noted Vernie. "Last year's oatmeal and some dandelions, I bet."

"Well, that would be my fault; I let all those trout get out of the trap."

"Things happen, sweetie."

"Y'think Karen's gonna make it to th' table?"

"Dunno, busy, busy gal these days."

"Yah, don't even know half of what she's – whoa!" Tomma was

staring into the slash and brush uphill.

Vernie was quick on the uptake. A bear, or wolves, or coyotes, or even a cougar would not have provoked such stillness in Tomma's manner. "Arm?" Vernie asked.

"Yes. Now." Leaving the tongs where they lay, both ran sidehill to where their bows and quivers leaned against a tree, and made cover behind an "ox-sized" log before slipping into their quivers, which also bore their short swords. Vernie watched as Tomma lay down and braced himself to string his bow, then Tomma nocked and watched while Vernie followed suit.

Vernie came up nocked and ready. There had not been time to don armguards; this was an issue for Vernie, who had a lot of scar tissue on his bow forearm and stood to rip flesh if it came to loosing an arrow. *So it goes, he thought.* "Whatcha got?"

"No idea, but it sounded to me like a two-legs on the sneak."

They stared uphill. For some time, there was nothing; then a crow squawked peculiarly; it was seeing something it neither expected nor liked. Both men drew their fletching back to their cheeks and aimed uphill.

A very large dog, wearing a leather collar, bounded up onto a log, looked at them briefly, gave two sweeps of its tail, and disappeared.

"What the —" breathed Vernie.

"Gee, a dog. Cheery-looking and *belongs* to somebody."

"Tomma, why is it always you and me that have these alien encounters?"

"It's not; remember Mo-reen. Keep sharp."

They waited. The crow continued with its conniption fit. After a long interval, a young man with long yellow hair, dressed in buckskin like Maggie, slowly and deliberately walked to a stump, climbed it, and stood up in full view, both hands in the air, palms out.

"Hiya."

"I'll be damned. I guess that means 'parley'," said Tomma.

"Now what?" asked Vernie.

"Now you watch the brush really, really good, and if someone stands up to shoot, put your arrow right through him, is what."

"You gonna break cover?"

"*He* did. That's brave and it asks for trust; if they get me they must know you might get away and raise the Creek on 'em. To prevent that, they would have had to shoot us while we were sitting ducks." Tomma laid aside his bow and shucked his quiver.

"Ah-h-h-h, I *hate* this," said Vernie. "Let's hope it's better'n that Lawson fellow."

"Sharp eye, that's all. Here goes." Tomma stood up and put out both palms. "Hey," he called out.

The blond youth grinned relief. Either that or he was a superb actor. "Sir, I must admit your friend there really, really scares me," he shouted. "He looks like he knows what he is doing. I, uh, I am shaking like a leaf."

Tomma shouted back. "Well, so am I; I don't know how many of you there are but I can feel eyes. I'm guessing I'm covered by some weapons too."

"Well, everyone must do what they must do. I do not mind telling you I have not done this before. We are a people, as you are, and we have had talks about how to meet you."

"Umm, well, for starters, don't *rush* things. We've been through a lot of hell lately and we're a trigger-happy bunch. And, 'course, we don't know but what you've got diseases we don't have, and vice versa."

"Yes, that makes sense. Suggestions?"

Without taking eyes off the woods, Vernie whispered. "Tomma, if they're on the level, see if they'll send one rep for quarantine."

"Sounds good." Tomma raised his voice. "Ahh, so, we do have a procedure in place, and it has worked for us before. Ya got a name?"

"You may call me Josep."

"K, well, I'm Tomma. So, let's say well met, provisionally; are you prepared to come, *alone*, and stay in isolation in our clinic for two weeks?"

"Clinic! Is this a *city*? But I should not pry. So, quarantine. You are very wise. Would I be able to talk with anyone?"

"Yes, the doctors and maybe a few specialists at first. Then we could see 'bout getting you back home with greetings and who knows, maybe some proposals."

"May I have a few moments, please?"

"Consultation, eh?"

The young man grinned engagingly. "It is wise to travel in company. I will be right back." He hopped down from the stump and disappeared.

Tomma immediately realized his unilateral exposure and did the same, gasping for breath. "*Jeeah*, this is scary stuff. Like painting myself with a target and subbing for the archery butts."

"Tomma, I think there are at least three, with the dog."

"And a 'people,' somewhere, if they're being straight with us. Presumably not on Decker Creek; we come up snake eyes every time we look there."

"Next valley over, then; we should have gone to see."

"Well, can't do everything, y'know. And you're right, somehow it's always you and me, and if we had blundered into *dogs* who knows how it might have turned out?"

"He's back."

Tomma checked; the palms-out stance had been resumed. He clambered up and did the same.

The stranger called out. "How about an exchange? One to come to our place and one to come to yours?"

Tomma felt there was an answer to this but felt woolly-headed.

Vernie saw the difficulty and prompted him. "Tell him we'll set a date; full moon or something, for a second go-round. That we have to consult, too, 'cuz the two of us don't have the authority for an official decision."

Tomma made the suggestion, and it was accepted with surprising speed.

"We like it," said the stranger. "If your people agree to meet and exchange visitors, how about we use the little clearing by the steel barn in the valley to the north of here? In, say, six days?"

Full moon. "I can't guarantee it, here and now, but I know of no reason why not. Assuming it happens, say three people from each side meet, exchange one? We'll have to quarantine our crew when they come back with you; and you might want to do the same."

A short delay. Then: "This is good. We will be there. Going now; please do not follow."

"Follow a crew that's got a *watchdog*? Trust me; nobody's coming up that hill."

The blond guy laughed a hearty laugh and jumped down from the stump. Vernie caught a glimpse of a large black man, or perhaps mulatto like himself. And then the woods were quiet.

"Huh." Vernie kept his stance and his lookout, but relaxed his arrow arm a little. "I think that was on the level."

"That or they are damned good actors. Think I gave away too much?"

"Well ... that was properly cagey, but they *do* probably know now that the Creek has no dogs."

"Damn. Well, didya see that guy that accidentally showed himself?"

"Yes. Tomma, to me his presence is reassuring; surely these people are not Kluxers."

"That would be nice; anyway, they're sure not skinheads." Tomma re-armed himself. "So let's wait till the crows calm down; they're *our* watchdogs. Then one of us can stash the tools under a cedar and we'll hie us home to supper and see about getting word to Hall of this thing."

Vernie gripped Tomma's shoulder. "Let's do that; I was ready for a short day and this is as good an excuse as any I've seen – in a long time."

∴

Karen of Ridge hiked down the mountain's road in her cedar-bark rain cape. Not that it was raining at the moment, but it might at any time, and there was still a bit of winter's chill in the air. She felt her sword belt pulling around to the left as she walked, and adjusted it with her hand. The cape was twisting as well. This came, she knew, of having a lopsided body. Perhaps she should learn to walk without swinging her hand.

As she came round one of the hairpin turns in the cart track, she met an ox team huffing up to Ridge. It was led by Yamaguchi, a particular friend. She stepped out of the way, and Guchi led the team past, then stopped the cart beside her.

"Hey, you," he said. He patted one of the animals on the head, and sat down, leaning against the bole of a bent fir tree.

"Hey, yourself. How many loads are left?" Karen flexed her knees, but didn't sit; she still felt awkward getting back up, and preferred keeping things simple.

"It's going to be about six, maybe seven. Savage Mary had a *lot* of stuff down there."

"So, we're almost done."

"Yah-yah. Your family is all moved in now, by the way. The rest of this stuff will be from outbuildings."

"So I heard."

"They've kept you up here this whole time; what do you *do* all day?"

"Well, a lot of it is reading and recitation; I'm studying chemistry and metallurgy."

"Has Old Mary got special plans for you, then?"

"Not this year; we have power for manufacturing, for the time being, so we're going to see if we can make some things we might need, 'down the road.'"

"Uh-huh, I hear what you're *not* saying. Some of that is *war* stuff. Why do you all think that guy's coming back?"

"Well, I'm the only one who saw him go. Except maybe Mr. Angle."

"And?"

"He didn't *walk* like a loser."

"Woo, so, readiness regime."

"Everyone always prepares for the last war.' We're trying to learn new stuff and be ready for the *next* one."

∴

It was almost dark when Karen reached New Ames. She'd seen the porch before, of course, several times, but she'd never gone up the

walk. There was no railing for the wooden steps, so she took them mindfully, and let herself in by the whitewashed front door.

"Home? Ho, ho house?"

"Karen? That is really you?" She heard Juanita's voice from down the hall, kitchen-way. "Come straight back; I am up to *here* in flour."

Karen hung up her wide-brimmed rain hat and pulled the thong of her cape. She slipped the buckle of her belt as well, and found a spare nail in the wall on which to hang her belongings. Walking down the dim hallway, she found an open door on the right, and looked in.

Quick, small Juanita, as absorbed in kitchen things as ever, stood by a work counter with her hair in a bun and a large bowl in front of her, much as Karen imagined she would find her. The bowl was rotating as Juanita stirred.

Karen stood beside her. "Hold that for you?"

For a split second, Juanita seemed hesitant; their eyes met. Karen put into her own eyes an expression that said: *I will not be treated as an invalid.*

Juanita's eyes replied, *no, indeed.* "Please, yes. Around to the back. And as I stir with this hand, I tip in a bowlful of flour, so! And the dough is stiffening, so I put both hands to the soup spoon, so. And now it is like old times."

"Barley?"

They both laughed.

"Yes, but Mr. Avery has sent down extra wheat this year, and so in spite of the troubles, we feed everyone easily. Now hand to me the big jar with the veg flakes, and we will put some in –"

"Turnip greens and kale?"

"Also beet greens, a little chard, dandelion, cabbage. To keep sickness from the door." Juanita twisted off the lid, poured a half cup of the dehydrated, crumbled foliage into her hand, dumped most of it in, and returned the rest to the jar.

"So now, it is a little thicker, and the dough cleans the sides of the bowl, and we set aside the spoon. What do you do?"

"I cover this bowl, and set it out back to stay cool overnight, so as not to rise too quickly, and bake tomorrow."

"It is so! Our Karen forgets nothing. So do that, please, and come back and we will set table for – eight, I think; make that nine, as there is a guest – bowls! Spoons! Soup, and we can dip in it last week's bread. Yah?"

Karen pulled the big bowl to her, covered it with its lid, gripped it against her ribs with her hand, and moved to the back door. For a moment she puzzled over the doorknob, then leaned the bowl against the door, turned and pulled the knob shuffling backwards, put her foot in the gap, returned her hand to the bowl, kicked the door open, and carried her burden to the cooling shelf in the back mudroom. Here

was yet another puzzle, for the shelf was higher than the one at Ames, but she solved that by discovering a small stepladder. By ascending the ladder and crouching against the ceiling a bit, Karen was able to shove the bowl into place one-handed.

*Where there is a will ...*it was slow, it was more work, but all things would have to be done so.

When she returned, she found dishes and utensils for nine on the counter, and Juanita by the pump, cleaning her arms and hands in a washbowl. Karen set the kitchen table, which was an old one with leafs at the ends, which she puzzled over for a moment, then pulled them out to make room for everyone.

"See," said Juanita, "you are always at home everywhere! I am still not used to this place; I liked our old farm and kitchen the best, yah? Warm in winter and cool in summer."

"Yes, the sunken kitchen was the best way. Perhaps we could take up this floor and rebuild more to our liking?"

"When the farming is caught up, maybe, you think? But when, ever, is farming caught up?"

Mrs. Ames put her head around the door. "Oh, my, who have we here?"

Karen felt a shock; Mrs. Ames had visibly aged in the last two moons. "Umm, me."

"Umm, me," she says. "Honey, may I *hug* you?"

Hugging was never Karen's strong suit; but she had made an exception for Mrs. Ames almost from the day she'd met her. The large woman came in, with a bit of a wobble in her step, and swept Karen into one long, farm-red arm, handing a basket to Juanita with the other.

"Here's y'dandelions, 'n some garlic greens, is there time to steam that for dinner?"

"There is a sunchoke soup, today; I will cut them up small and add them to it and they will wilt in time for everyone to come in, I think, and enjoy."

"Thank you, dear; I have to sit down! Whew! Karen, girl, stop looking like you need something to do and sit and let me just look at you a bit!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"'Yes, ma'am.' That's all I ever heard from you at Ames, but now you're th' biggie, and th' guest of honor, too. How do ya like our new digs?"

"I'm sure there is more space here than before."

"They must be teachin' ya politics. It's not as comfy; colder in th' cold, so it'll be hotter in th' hot, I'm thinkin'. Cows wouldn't care for th' pasturage as much, neither."

"Wouldn't?"

"Well, Florence up and died on us; th'mastitis whipped us. And th' rest had found homes – y'know; spread th' joy. I'm too tired these days t'do much of that stuff any more anyhow." Mrs. Ames propped her elbow on the table, almost knocking over an empty glass. Juanita brought over a pitcher of water, and moved the glass away unobtrusively. "So – whatcha been doing?"

"Me? Math, chemistry, metals. We're re-learning how to analyze materials – spectroscopy."

"Huh? Girl, that's a ten-Amero word if I ever heard one!"

"Oh – well, Dr. Savage took a prism from a smashed pair of binoculars and mounted it on a frame. I burn known things over a spark gap, observe the rainbow on the wall, and list its "lines" – we're going to try to duplicate some compounds from before the Undoing. It's not quality spectroscopy but we're learning."

"Ya, well, ya got me, honey. Nita, ya got everything under control?"

"Yes, Mrs. Ames, the soup is ready and I will ring the bell." Juanita hung up her apron and stepped out the back.

"Thank you, honey." Mrs. Ames returned her attention to Karen. "They all think I'm on my way *out*, for cryin' out loud, but I at least offer to pull my own weight. C'n do it, too, if I don't rush it." She looked down at her hand-sewn moccasins. "'It's these fool things; can't always tell where I'm puttin' my feet, in 'em."

The bell, which was the old iron pipe from Ames, sang under the poll of the hand axe. David Molinero, looking bigger and older than Karen remembered, came in through the door with a load of firewood. He nodded to Karen, who nodded back. It wouldn't do to fuss over the boys, even if Karen were the fussing kind. They were at that age, sensitive to adult scrutiny. *And what about me? Have I never left "that age?"*

Juanita, who'd held the door open for him, came in briskly, closing it behind her. "There will be no need to feed the fire; we are done for the day, I think. Drop those in the woodbox and wash up, yah?"

He did so, morosely.

Footsteps, with the scraping noises that accompany mud season, began to resound from the mudroom.

Errol came in, followed by Emilio, Raoul, and Vernie. They greeted Karen, each in his own way, washed their hands and faces and came to the table. A brief offering of the bland, but sufficient, meal was made to Jeeah by Mrs. Ames, at the head of the table.

"So, where's Tomma?" asked Mrs. Ames, ladling out soup with a shaking hand. Vernie kept his bowl in motion beneath the ladle, so that none would spill.

"Well, we had an adventure."

"He's not hurt?" Juanita paused by the stove, where she was fetching barley cakes from the warming shelf.

"No, he's at Hall, on the phone to Mr. Avery. We've been debriefing all afternoon. We met some *people*."

Karen stopped, spoon halfway to her mouth. "So, not Creekers?"

"No, apparently the valley north of Decker Creek has a group, not so different from us. We only met a patrol, but they say they are about *fifty*, I think."

"Please. Tell it from the beginning," requested Emilio.

"Umm, maybe between bites?" Vernie picked up a cake and held it in the steam from his bowl.

"That is to be expected; who isn't hungry?" asked Emilio. "The days are longer and we are feeling it in our bones. This farm was somewhat neglected."

"Okay, and it's maybe the fifth time I've told this today."

Vernie recounted the encounter with the party from Roundhouse, with interruptions, over the course of the meal. Karen could see that everyone had their own reaction, mostly apprehensive, to the story. What would it mean to make extended contact with a group who had obviously developed a parallel culture, alike but different? Did they have anything, besides potentially dogs, to offer? What about diseases? Points of conflict in belief?

"You're looking thoughtful." Errol was watching Karen, as the others were getting up from table and moving toward the front room.

"Lots to think about. Clashing religions, maybe." She rose and picked up his bowl and hers.

"I'll help clear." Errol began reaching for bowls and utensils as well. "Tell me your own views – I've never heard you make an offering to Jeeah."

"I think I get what that's about – didn't Elsa Chaney start it? Something about being grateful to the Earth."

"So it is, but it's growing into a real religion, somehow."

"But you don't seem over-enthused."

"Well, I like straight-grained ash for some jobs, curly maple for others. I'm guessing you're a bit like me."

Karen lowered the bowls into the warm water in the sink, which was mildly foamy from the lye-soap that had been shaved into it.

"Maybe so. I was brought up on books and magazines and discussion. One of my father's regular sayings was that one should not seek additional explanations."

"Occam."

"You know about him! Well, okay. So I was reading in a magazine about birds."

"Birds?"

There was a – a photograph of an albatross chick that had been – raped by an adult male that couldn't find a mate in the colony. And so its neck was bleeding. And the smaller birds, mockingbirds with

special beaks, came and *pecked at the wound to keep it bleeding*, so they could have blood to drink. They had in fact *evolved* to do this – to live on the blood of raped chicks."

"An arid island, I presume."

"Yes! An arid island. Gaia – *Jeeah* – doesn't provide. The *blood* provides. What's there is what's there, and what isn't, isn't in it. It's sufficient explanation."

"Gotcha." Errol, privately pained by Karen's struggles with the washing up, edged across and took over the bowls. Karen seemed preoccupied enough that he was sure he could get away with it.

"So," she began, looking over her shoulder toward the front room. "Mm, what's with Mrs. Ames?"

"Parkinson's. Marcee – she's been studying up – told us."

"Oh."

Juanita came in from the front room and strode over to the wood stove. She held her hand palm down over the soup, nodded her head in satisfaction, and looked over to them. "Karen, this has cooled enough for our other guest, perhaps you would take him his dinner?"

"Oh! Was that what the ninth bowl was about?"

"Yes; he's not well; but insisted on visiting with us so as to see you when you arrived."

Errol added, unsmilingly, "Upstairs in bed, door at the end. I've got it covered here."

Karen took the half-filled bowl, with a spoon, from Mrs. Molinero. Why all the solemnity? Well, she would go and see.

A gesture from Errol found her the door to the staircase, and she made her way up toward such light as the landing afforded. Here there was an unadorned hallway, with assorted sacks piled along the walls. These no doubt contained goods from Ames which had not yet found homes. Karen tapped at the last door, which was cracked open, with her foot, then kned the door open and looked in.

The room was half-filled with boxes, barrels and sacks. Among them, Karen saw her yew bow and Aleesha's compound bow. In the other half, Allyn lay in a straw tick bed that had been made up on the floor. Outside, the last light was fading from a gray day over Maggie's Hill.

Allyn looked up from his pillow. "Well, hey. I wondered, was I going to be fed." He smiled.

Karen was struck by two things: one, that she had always liked that smile, for its gentleness. The other was that there was a pervading "sourness" in the air. It reminded her forcibly of the war. "Of course you are. Juanita didn't want to burn your lips, I guess."

"K, well, c'n you help me sit up? There's an extra pillow."

Karen knelt and set down the bowl. She arranged the pillows and Allyn, shoving against the mattress with his feet, scrunched himself

up to a sitting posture. His right stump flailed to help him keep his balance. The left, which was wearing fresh bandages, he held away from himself, stiffly. Karen reached for the nearby tin-can alky lamp and lit it with one of the ubiquitous new strike-anywhere matches she'd helped design. Then she pulled the bowl closer to her knees and lifted out a spoonful of the soup.

"Dinner?"

"Yes, please."

She gave him a spoonful.

"Ack. Jerusalem artichoke."

"S'good for you. Hang on a second."

Karen found it difficult offering the spoon from the right, and moved round to the left side of the bed. They spoke between his swallows.

"Adjustments," observed Allyn. "We learn fast."

"Mnh. Eat."

"Yes'm."

"What's with the bandages?"

"You never did beat around the bush. Dunno, they can't keep it clean. We tried the pross – pross –"

"Prostheses."

" – hook things, and I guess it was too soon. There's stuff going on in this one." He waved his left stump, then blanched visibly.

"You try too hard. I *said*, just teach."

"Well, I was always *hands-on*." He smiled again.

She gave him the last bite, and set the spoon down in the empty bowl. Drawing a bit of cloth from her possibles bag, she dabbed at his chin. "So, you came up to see *me*? Where were you?"

"Rogers' – New Wilson, I guess. I was working at the old Wilson's, showing the kids how to prune, and came down with fever. Went home, and now I'm just the boy next door."

Karen's knees began to bother her, so she switched to squatting on her heels. "Didn't you go to the clinic?"

"Oh, yeah, they've seen more of me than anybody else. 'Sick' of me by now. 'Specially Marcee, I think she thinks I'll give the baby something."

"What are they doing for the arm?"

"Everything they can, which is damned little. There's a 'pungent ungeunt', which I think is mostly bear fat, soldier-weed and poppy juice, and lots of comfrey tea. And they say I shouldn't move around too much; the bad stuff travels more in the bloodstream. I had myself brought up here in a stretcher, actually. Everyone's been very kind."

Was that sweat? Karen felt his forehead. "*Damn* it. I'm not liking this at all."

"I was kind of hoping you'd say that. Listen, uh, shit, I don't know

how to say it."

"Just be direct, like me."

They looked at each other.

"Okay, I *will*. What, umm, what time of the month are you?"

For three heartbeats, Karen said nothing at all. Then she made up her mind. "Be right back."

"Not going anywhere," he smiled again, radiant this time.

Karen stood up, crossed over to the open door, peeked into the hall, then turned back into the room, kicking the door shut behind her.

∴

Wolf was *ready* for spring.

There had been little in the way of decent food and shelter through the winter months. He'd kept away from the towns on the principle that they had been the sort of places in which the Pilgrims had met people like *him*. Along the overgrown country roads were similar dangers. It had now been decades since the Undoing, but most travelers sought out such homes, barns and other structures as might contain some remnant of civilization's food web, and the more enterprising among them set up shop in such places to await the arrival of others and prey upon them.

When the sparse snows had come, things had been simpler for him. Small animals could be tracked to their lairs and dug out. The habits of large carnivores could be read in tracks as well; Wolf, in his isolation, had become more adept in reading the signs, and begun to blend into this new world.

Eventually he'd found a locked-up A-frame cabin with only one windowpane out, and noting there were no footprints in the vicinity of the doors or the window, had decided to risk a closer look. The window had divided lights with four large panes, one of which had been cleared of glass. The screen leaned against the wall nearby. Wolf had sniffed the dank air at the window, listened, and then, with great care, pried apart the remainder of the sash and climbed in.

Here he'd found the usual: pine-paneled floors, walls and ceilings, rope rugs, a wood stove, prints of mountain scenes, Adirondack chairs, tables with "rustic" lamps. There seemed to be a theme: posters and statuettes of bears in anthropomorphic poses. Timeless, if a little cheesy.

A child had discovered the place, cleaned out the pantry over the course of a few weeks, and then gone upstairs to die in bed. Mice had made nests in the blankets all around the remains.

Wolf had eaten a few blind, pink mouselets and moved on to inventory the place: a stove, refrigerator, cabinets full of chipped plates and bowls and such, drawers full of old-lady stuff, a trunkful of

board games, knickknacks, travel books. The usual "vacation getaway" spot for the retired lower- middle class of days gone by.

A photo print in a frame had drawn his attention; it displayed a pre-teen boy, half smiling, half embarrassed, posing with a bent, gray-haired, and mildly stern elderly woman. "To G-Ma. Wally."

Curious, Wolf had drawn the photo out from beneath the backing and turned it over; a date had been printed: 04-29. He'd carried it to the upstairs bunk and compared the structure of the skull reposing on the corruption-stained pillow with that of the child in the photo. Very likely this was Wally, gone to ground in the only safe-house he knew, twenty-two years or so ago.

A padlocked shed, tucked away in undergrowth, had better rewarded Wolf's efforts. He had expected as much; such doors had resisted foragers of Wally's generation. A case of cans, labels rasped away by banana slugs and rusted but intact, had proved to be an energy-rich white variety of beans in red sauce. Other cans had held, among other things, the ubiquitous "pineapple juice," whatever that was. There were quite a lot of tools; perhaps this had been "G-Pa's" man-cave. In a corner stood a badly rusted .22 bolt-action rifle. On shelves he'd found some decrepit fishing tackle, some plastic toys, a small pair of binoculars, "made in China," and a toy bow, also of some sort of plastic, with a degraded string, along with several arrows with field points and red polyethylene fletching.

Wolf had already suffered some deprivation due to his belated discovery that the AK, which had been such an asset when he'd had his small army, was a liability for a man alone. Yes, he could defend himself with it, and hunt, if need be, while his ammunition held out and remained reliable, but only at the risk of calling undue attention to his location. He'd now carried the AK for months without using it at all, and was concerned about its condition. So little oil of any kind these days! Yet he was loath to give it up. He'd fashioned a succession of knobbed throwing sticks and had become, by necessity, adept at waiting for small mammals to come within range. The bow represented a step up.

Returning to the tackle box, Wolf had located a reel of fly line and stripped it to get the nylon backing, and had re-strung the bow. He also re-worked for himself a couple of wicked arrows using small frog gigs as the points; perhaps he could learn to use them during the spring fish runs. He had also taken a pair of needle-nosed pliers, the binoculars, some wire for snare-making, some safety pins, and some hooks and a roll of six-pound-test line that seemed not too brittle. Loading his backpack with as many of the cans as he could carry, and snatching a functional set of rain gear from a nail, he'd walked away over the melting snow into the gently falling rain, secure in the knowledge he could now reach Roseburg before summer.

He'd stopped on the edge of the deeper woods and looked back, surprising himself with a salute for the long-departed Wally and his well-equipped grandparents.

At night he'd unobtrusively buried himself in forest litter; nothing hungry had disturbed his sleep. Wolf had heard of a large hair-covered man-like creature that was supposed to have lived hereabouts in this fashion. With bitter humor he supposed he might be mistaken for it.

∴

A day came when the country Wolf traversed was more sparsely vegetated and less prone to incessant rain. Poison oak abounded, with many of last year's blushed leaves intact. There were numerous acorns beneath the twisted oaks, and he tried adding these to his diet along with the abundant small ground squirrels, but found the nuts bitter on the stomach. He managed to dispatch a small, very pregnant doe with the little bow, and camped out on its protein for days as the weather warmed. Over the next range of hills, Wolf knew, the houses, of which he'd seen few that were intact, would be more numerous, along with roads, strip malls, and the like, all wrecked, but familiar.

These were his old stomping grounds, and he'd done much of the stomping.

As soon as the venison turned sour, Wolf watered up at the nearby creek, which was running muddy but looked reasonably healthy, and climbed to the top of the range. Setting down his pack in a patch of manzanitas, he moved to the shade of a tall, isolated madrone, with young chinkapin trees all round its barkless feet, and settled down for a day's observation.

Nothing was going on in the overgrown streets and back yards within his view. This was significant; the Umpqua river valley was narrow here; it had been a prime site for preying upon Pilgrim groups. Perhaps the migration had finally petered out. Filled with overturned and burned out, or abandoned and stripped vehicles, the former urban spaces were still, except for the occasional movements of what were, he confirmed by the binoculars, mostly coyotes. These were working circuitous routes round a pride of lions that rested in the shade of several Ponderosa pines in a vacant lot. The lions, descended from those that had escaped a large private zoo nearby, were motionless except for a flicking of the ears at some spring-hatched flies. "Nothing to see here – move along." Wolf rested the glasses longest on the old KKUV building. If there were any radio broadcasting activity in this location, he could see no sign of it.

So, where *was* everybody?

He decided to relocate to the next hill west, across the old freeway. From there, he would be able to observe one of his former homes –

the Douglas Patrol and Detention Facility.

Returning to his backpack, Wolf saw movement, of something large and spotted, from the corner of his eye, and hesitated a moment. Familiar, but worrying. Too many big cats around here; they must still be living off the herds of several kinds of ungulates that had radiated out from Winston into these hills. He picked up the AK, popped the foam earplug from the end of the barrel, unwrapped the oiled cloth from the receiver, held open the bolt, put a thumb inside to reflect light off his thumbnail up the barrel, and looked in. Clean. His magazines, also wrapped in oiled cloth, were in the backpack. These he unwrapped, snapped a precious round out, and re-wrapped. He slipped the jacketed brass round into the chamber. One never knew. If the cat was tracking *him*, he might have to resort to a noisy means of defense.

Walking quietly from stand to stand of madrone and oak, Wolf made his way down to, and across, the Highway of Death and the abandoned neighborhood of manufactured homes – half of them burned out – without incident. Plunging into the shade of the Douglas firs and Ponderosa pines on the other side, he came to a chain-link fence, swung himself easily over it, and began his ascent. He took his time and stayed hydrated; it was never a good idea to make much racket, and it was getting hot out for the time of year. He checked behind himself from time to time, sitting down in the brush and waiting, as if he were still-hunting, for any sign of movement. A few black-and-white birds pattered about on tree trunks, looking for bugs in the bark.

It was nearly sunset when Wolf approached the peak of the ridge. Here he expected to find an outcrop of stone, through a crack in which he would worm himself into position to observe the old facility. But the outcrop didn't look right. Glassing it with the binoculars, he realized it had been built up cleverly, with native stone, into a lookout.

Occupied, too. Not that he could see anything conclusive, but he got "that feeling" when looking in that direction.

So. Now we're onto something.

No telling what, though.

What to do? There was no guarantee that they were the "Rogue Valley Volunteers" or associated with Magee in any way; and no guarantee that if they were, they would welcome his appearance. If he bypassed the lookout, they would be in his rear, and if he ran in into trouble ahead, could find this way blocked against his retreat. It was unlikely they had a signal system that worked at night, other than courier. If he supplanted them in the lookout, on the morrow he could examine the old prison site below at his leisure. Then, if it seemed appropriate to withdraw, who could know that it had been he that had been here?

Besides, he was low on protein.

Backing painstakingly away through the brush, Wolf settled down to a wait, comfortably out of sight, dressing himself warmly from the backpack with a black wool sweater and matching watch cap. He ate the last can of the "G-Ma" beans, drank water, blackened his face and hands with lampblack from a bean can under which he'd burnt a tallow candle weeks earlier, and sharpened his knife on a fine gritstone – slowly, so as to limit the noise of the blade rasping against the stone.

Well past midnight, and also past quarter-moonset, Wolf sequestered his pack and rifle under a projecting ledge, deployed his war quiver and sheath – arrows on his left thigh, knife on his right – and approached the summit again, small bow in hand.

Softly, softly.

A late spring front had moved in, in the evening, and the tiny raindrops on the new foliage helped mask his movements. Wolf's nose told him that someone had recently urinated by the entrance to the grotto. Easing round the doorway, he was able to peer into the darkness ahead, and see that two men were sitting at a stone table. He could discern no weapons.

Based on the size of the space, there would be two more, perhaps – sleeping. Watch on, watch off.

One arrow, a sharpened field point, was already nocked to his string. Wolf drew, aimed for center mass on the first shadow, and released.

Neither of the sitters moved. Something about the thump of the arrow – as of its having been fired into straw – was his first clue that something was wrong. Whoa, time to go! Wolf habitually nocked another arrow as he turned to flee the now-obvious trap.

Someone stood up in the darkness at the edge of the woods below.

"Freeze! Stay where you are!" shouted a voice. Wolf released his second arrow into the shadow, which emitted a groan and fell over backwards. No bag of straw, that one! He nocked a third arrow as he ran.

"Fire!" the same voice, a familiar one, shouted. As Wolf loped toward the relative safety of the dark line of Douglas fir trees, an ear-splitting report – shotgun! – went off nearby, and at the same moment something heavy struck him in the back, staggering him and causing him to drop the bow. Two shadows rose up before him, as if reaching for his arms, and he drew his knife, blade down and edge forward, and stepped in toward them both, sweeping for jugular veins from within their reach.

There were screams – and then another explosion.

Wolf saw a burst of light illuminating the trees with his silhouette, then, vaguely aware that he'd been struck on the back of the head, observed the dark and unforgiving stones rushing up to meet him.

"My god, Wolf, what was *that* all about?" The familiar voice again.

"Mmh?" Wolf was having trouble getting his bearings. And he shouldn't be replying, in any case – should be feigning continued unconsciousness, gathering data on his surroundings – but the pain in his head kept him from thinking clearly. If he'd been shot at point-blank range from a shotgun, why was he thinking at all?

Opening his eyes in darkness, Wolf flexed a bit and found that he was lying on his back, on stone or cement, with his hands tied uncomfortably beneath him – wire? – and his clothes were gone. All he was wearing was the narrow-gauge wiring on his wrists, and some kind of shackle on one ankle.

Nice. Might as well converse.

"Mullins?"

"Well, yeah, that's me. Prisoner number three-one-eight-one-seven. And you're Wolf, three-three-four- –"

"– -oh-four-seven. So that's *old* news. So what's going on here?"

"I asked *you* first. We thought we were just catching an interloper. Wolf, ya got me in trouble, I'm down three good men."

"Well, sorry about that. They come after me, I go after them."

"But, Wolf, you come sneakin' like that, what are we gonna do? So ... what *was* that all about?"

"I got info that Magee was callin' us in."

"Uh, huh, and so you shoot your way into the listening post?"

"Didn't know it was yours."

"Did ya *ask*?"

"Mullins, am I where I think I am?"

"As in home sweet home? Yeah, the Hole itself, block A."

"So, how come I'm alive?"

"Mmh? Oh, okay, I can answer that too. Bean-bag gun." Pause. "So where ya *been* for two whole years?"

"Eatin' my way up towards Port Land."

Pause. "Got a reason why your little army ain't with you?"

"Umm, sure. Things is a bit rougher out there than maybe I thought."

"Well, tell ya what, Wolf, I take ya report, if it's good stuff, maybe I'm not in so much trouble for taking casualties."

"I hear ya, Mullins, but some things, 'need to know basis.'"

"Shit. Y'probably just killed us both." Longer pause.

Ah, there are listeners. Figures.

The thing to do, then, would be to be open about – *some* things. Up to a point.

Mullins shifted around on the floor. From the sound of it, he was

naked and shackled, himself. "Umm, 'kay, back to th' chit-chat. You crossed the freeway in *daylight*, right in front of us. What brought that on?"

"Th' big cats. They look nocturnal."

"Yeah, they are; that's why we encourage 'em." Pause. "Wolf, I gotta tell ya, I dunno if Magee's even wanta see ya. Y'come in here 'n try to off people, no questions asked, it's like y'want to be *disloyal*. Why no front door?"

"Mullins. Lissen at y'self. *I'm* not even sure Magee's still around, an' am *I* gonna go up th' Hole road an' walk up to th' *gate*? What if th' effin' Yoo Ess Army was back? *You* remember what it was like bein' their prisoner here; and for all I know, y'are again, an' me *with* ya. I come over th' hill to scope out th' Hole, an' that outpost was in my way. I figgered to clean it out an' do my own effin' listenin'. By th' way, nice job on th' piss by th' doorway."

"Huh! You taught me that one." Pause. "Wolf, gimme somethin' ta live on, here. Where's yer men?"

"'K, well, I guess I'm goin' nowhere wi' not tellin' ya. We was doin' all right on our own, workin' our way up the north-running river, when we run into a buncha effin' Pilgrims 'at c'd *defend* 'emselves. Got boxed in and wiped. My own fault, too. Was in a spot where I couldn't get to my men an' found a hole in th' action and walked outta there. Been comin' this way ever since."

"'Wolf the Lucky.' But, Pilgrims? That stayed *put*?"

"Ahh, I dunno, like th' Eastsiders, dressed peculiar, organized, not runnin' north."

"How c'd they do that? Build a fort, live off other Pilgrims? We're about out of Pilgrims, y'know."

"Yeah, I noticed. Well, yeah, Mullins, I think they did do that in a way. Some folks, I'm thinkin' military deserters, sorta backed into a canyon, an' recruited heavy while they could. So, yeah, sorta fortified. *Armed*, too."

"Wolf, that don't sound quite right; if there were enough of them in one place to take out your army, what the hell have they been *eatin'*?"

Wolf rolled over as far as the leg iron would let him. He faced in the direction of Mullins' voice and rested the side of his still-aching head on the cold floor. "Well, I'll tell ya. Oats. Wheat. Potatoes. Beans. Mutton. *Beef*. Some stuff I've eaten, I never even heard of."

"Dubya-tee-eff, Wolf, *farmers*?"

"*Farmers*, Mullins. As Magee'd say: '*a land of milk and honey*.'"

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"So, can I watch?" Billee set her bow, quiver, and fanny pack against the wall and stepped over to the counter.

Karen turned her head. She was wearing a pre-Undoing respirator and an old blue dishwashing glove. In her gloved hand she was holding what looked like a glass straw over a spinning disk with a tiny brass cartridge in the middle, clipped to the metal center post with a clothespin. "Mmh."

"I guess that's a yes."

Karen set down the pipette and reached up to turn off a switch on the canopy that hummed above the counter. She pulled down the respirator beneath her chin. Billee found the red suction marks around Karen's face funny, but for once refrained from comment.

"I wasn't going to be much for conversation in this getup," explained Karen.

"Oh, I didn't mean to shut you down."

"No, I need to give my back a rest. It's been bugging me a lot lately."

Billee glanced at Karen's changing shape. "Sure, that makes sense." "Been out watching?"

"Running. There's a meeting and the phones are kind of down."

"Ah.. Yes, Selk's been put on that, which bugs him; he wants to be playing in the 'control room.'" Karen stretched and leaned back in her chair, arm overhead. "I wish I could be outside more; this 'for the good of the Creek' stuff matters, but it can wear a person down."

"Well, that cuts both ways; I'm out in all weathers and I think I'm going to be a old wrinkled prune by the time I'm twentyish."

"You're exaggerating; you're growing into a real prize."

Billee reddened and looked away for a moment, then back.

"So, um, you had a row with th' Savage."

"Mmh? Old news. Well, it was my own fault. I mean, apparently she has plans and I've been kind of crossing them."

"How'd she get onto you so fast?"

"I was throwing up at work."

"Well, that would do it. But you're still on the chemistry thing."

"Yes, but we had to tighten up my procedures. It's not good for the baby for me to inhale this stuff or work with lead. So we got this old range hood running and Deela's doing the swaging and such for me. The tough part was finding a glove; Ro-eena came up with eight, but all but one were left-handed."

"I guess people used to wear out the right-handed ones more? But what's doing here?" Billee pointed to the turning disk, which was adapted from an old phonograph player, running at 78 rpm.

"Well, we want to come up with a liquid primer, which we can drip into the cases and spin into the rims. It's related to the strike-anywhere matches."

"For twenty-tuos? Why not centerfire?"

Karen was, yet again, impressed. Avery had put a lot of work into

the young woman. "Those are a little tougher for us, because the primers are small and the liquid is not very reliable yet. And twenty-two was originally a black powder round anyway, so we feel we have a simpler path to a reliable product. I'm up to about forty percent ignition now; which is almost good enough to put some single shots into service. And a *bunch* of those have been collected, along with a couple of rimfire revolvers; so it seems worth doing. After these there will be shotguns and thirty-eights and forty-fours, I think; so I expect to be underground here for a long time to come."

"Sorry about that."

"S'okay."

"So ..." Billee hesitated.

"Spit it out." Karen offered her one of her rare smiles.

"... so, 'Mrs. Allyn' – what's it like?"

"What is what like? Love, sex, pregnancy, marriage or widowhood?"

Billee reddened again. "Mm, okay, all the above."

"Same as everything else, only more complicated and more tiring, I think. I think. I, I don't know much about *any* of them. There was just that one time, and he went downhill so quickly. And so we took care of him and then he was ... pfft! Body off to Hall Farm just like *that*. I hardly knew the man. I don't even have a *picture*." Karen's eyes began shining. "He ... he meant well. But we never had a *life*, not like some people around here, so I couldn't really tell you any of what you're asking. The widowhood part ... well, people look at you liked you've attained some kind of *status*, which is a thing that has neither taste, nor smell, nor color."

Karen pulled off the respirator and slapped it down on the counter. "Here, get this thing off me." She raised her blue-gloved hand and offered it to Billee.

Billee tugged the glove off and laid it aside. Karen flexed her hand and looked round the room. "Let's get out into the air and I'll tell you all about pregnancy. That's the part I know best, starting with what's like to waddle up three flights of stairs."

"You're not *that* big yet. Hardly even shows."

"No, but it *feels* like it; and my bladder is giving me fits." Karen reached for her sheathed knife on the counter and jammed it in the sash round the waist of her tunic. She threw off the switches at her workstation and strode for the door.

"Well, wait up, arready, yah?" Billee ran to her gear and gathered it up. She brandished her unstrung bow. "Ya-yah!"

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"This meeting is now convened." Avery Murchison looked round the

folding table that had been set up in the observation room. Mary Savage, her graying hair wilder than ever, sat at the other end from him, wheelchair versus wheelchair. Behind Mary's chair sat Selk, one of her "wizards." To Avery's right were two even frailer women: the recently widowed Ellen, Avery's mother, and Elsa Chaney, the mystic, who was filling in for her husband, Tom. To Avery's left were Wilson, formerly his right-hand man at Ridge, currently of Murchison's, and Emilio of New Ames. All sat in expectant attention. Ro-eena, the Recorder, sat unobtrusively in a corner. Her red hair was longer than Avery had last seen it, and she was braiding it absent-mindedly. He knew that though she was gazing out the thick quartz window toward the white snows of the Three Sisters, she wouldn't miss a thing.

"Wednesday, May 25, 2051. Thank you for meeting with us on a full moon, ladies." This was greeted with tolerant chuckles; meetings held on or near the *new* moon had been known to fall apart over histrionics. No one disputed the connection; most Creek women ovulated with the full moon and then, two weeks later, went through symptoms that could not entirely be discounted. Not that it affected their work in general, but meetings had sometimes been a noted exception.

The joke was that, Ro-eena excepted, those present were well past menopause.

"Agenda? One; visitors. Two; patrols. Three; prospects for the year, agriculturally. Four; state of the armory. Five; matters concerning Karen, 'munitions engineer.' These last two are related? Hmm, okay. Six; proposal by Selk to investigate the purpose of the control console – I presume this one behind me? – the purpose for which the console was constructed. Take them in order?"

Heads nodded.

"Okay, one; visitors."

Emilio and Wilson looked at each other. Wilson gestured with an open hand to Emilio, who looked round the table and cleared his throat. "We have exchanged visitors with the Roundhouse tribe and have a few observations. A Mr. Josep, one of their leaders, stayed two weeks in the Clinic in the care of Doctor Marcee under Doctor Tom's supervision. He's young, healthy, mentally agile, enterprising, and has been surprisingly forthcoming. His people are not what we would call well-to-do; a few crops, dogs. They've become expert hunter-gatherers and trackers. They've been encouraged by adverse circumstances to take up residence in a single fortified building, hence their name, and have suffered some attrition through deprivation and warfare, as we have. Notably they've reportedly encountered different invaders than we, which tends to confirm our impression that the risk of new hostilities may come from more than one source. Mr. Tomma has visited with the tribe and his story corroborates that of Mr. Josep. You

may refer to Ro-eena here for details."

Emilio cleared his throat again. "Several on the Creek have said it might be useful to encourage wider visitation with a view to recruiting the Roundhouse people to join with us in our life here, perhaps by, it would be, stages – say five to ten people at a time. We are very short on labor of all kinds at present."

Elsa raised her hand. "What about religion? I've heard some unsettling things."

"Yes, it would be the Christianity. Roundhouse has a version what used to be called Evangelical Protestantism, with emphasis on adult conversion, baptism by immersion, and 'worship' once every seven days. They regard the adult conversion as characterized by something called 'redemption,' after which the deity 'provides' what is prayed for, in the 'worship' time and whenever one prays. Those whose requests are fulfilled more frequently than the rest are regarded as the 'favored' of the deity, and respected accordingly. Mr. Josep is foremost among these, and as such, though very young, is what we would call an elder; I think they use the term, but with a different, it would be, intent, than we."

"All innocuous enough; but have they commented on our social ... our ways in any way? What I'm getting at is views that might be prejudicial to an intensified relationship between us and them."

"That would be the 'unsettling' part. I have visited with Mr. Josep. He does not say so, directly, but I think he does not think highly of Jeeah. And Tomma and Vernie are a worry to him."

Here Ellen raised her hand, and Ro-eena called on her. "The not saying so is a help. At least, so far, they're not the Lawsons."

Avery nodded, over his shoulder, to Ro-eena, and she called his name. "I think, from what Mr. Emilio says, there is a sentiment abroad to ask Roundhouse to send a few more people for another round of acclimatization, to feel out possible cooperative ventures. Eventual joint patrols, say. Does anyone here object at this stage?"

Elsa signaled to Ro-eena impatiently, and before Ro-eena could respond, put in: "Assuming we behave ourselves and *they* behave *themselves*, none at all. But I'd also query the stores – can we *feed* them?"

Avery looked to Ro-eena, who waved her hand resignedly. "Well, that leads into item three. Shall we skip Wilson's patrol stuff for the moment?" Heads nodded. "I can tell you that we're not in a terrific position here at Ridge, with the granary, veggie seed and root storage. Things have worn *thin* over the last year. Inadequate irrigation, insufficient labor for fall harvests of course, uncooperative weather, and transportation from field to here was very slow, with too much exposure in transit. We've had to hold a lot of things on the farms, and there has been loss to molds and such, and to vermin. Wilson?"

"It's bad. The favas were not planted 'til March, and, worse, we'll have no winter wheat, to which ever'one was looking forward. It's a hot spring this year, and we've been in a rush with th' oats, barley and veggies. Potatoes are lookin' good, but if we lose this crop there'll be no seed potatoes – no reserve at all – and of course there's no place to get more."

Emilio lifted a hand. "Irrigation is a matter for concern. We are behind on the production of fabric and the windmills have fared poorly over the winter. People are requesting that electricity be at least run from Ridge to operate pumps in the Creek."

"By 'people' I presume mainly you mean the Bledsoes?" asked Avery.

Wilson signed to Ro-eena and replied. "Yes, Armon at Bledsoe has gone 'round the Creek suggesting that Ridge wants all the juice for itself, for *political* advantage."

Elsa fairly exploded. "What is *with* those people? They're our neighbors at Chaney and Murchison, but when we ask or offer help with the planting they make excuses; and I'm hearing about hoarding there, too."

Ro-eena sat with her hand half-raised, unsure if procedure had been abandoned. Avery smiled over his shoulder at her, and she voiced his name, almost in a whisper.

"Well, Wilson has fingered it; Mr. Armon has taken upon himself a work of dissension on the Creek, by representing Ridge as despotic in some way. *Are* we?"

Dr. Mary signalled to reply. "A fair question, m'lad. You're the heir apparent to the elder Murchisons, who have been seen, by most, as the Adam and Eve of our little world. Yet you're seldom seen, or rather, in recent years, through no fault of your own, *never* seen, except by those who have direct business here. So there's a 'Lord Avery brooding on the heights' perception that will be tough to live down, even *if* all your actions are completely benign."

Ellen started to raise an objection, but Mary plowed on. "It's about perception, my dear; and I'm about to tar myself wi' th' same brush. I'm '*Savage*' Mary, remember; it even says so on our *maps*, f' goodness' sake. And I'm only a hair more ambulatory than your boy, Ellen, so some folks have barely or never laid eyes on me in all these years. Th' situation *begs* for a mystique, and people who feel themselves deprived by war and famine will easily latch on to that and embellish it to what they'll perceive as their best ends. And we have done little but play into that; the secretiveness about Ridge over the years, then we let word out there's power here, but keepin' it all to ourselves."

Avery and Ellen both raised their hands, but Mary held out hers, palm up. "Not done! I *know*; we're doin' th' right things an' for th' right reasons, an' th' 'reactor' should be used sparingly to extend its useful

life. But we have communicated this poorly, because we've all been anxious to put our heads down an' make hay while the sun shines. Kiddos, I think we have been guilty of a little hubris, and it may come home to roost. I have had a shakeup lately that gives me some insight; but I'll clam up now and let Mr. Avery think his way out of the consequences of our isolation." She grinned. "Out loud, of course."

Avery signed again, looking to Ellen, who acquiesced by putting out her hand, palm down, toward Ro-eena. "Do you mean it's time for a proposal?" he asked.

"I dunno, do you have one?" asked Mary, grinning.

Emilio, who'd been in a brown study, came to life and signed. "I too have had my thoughts about this thing."

Everyone turned to him. "Morale is low; where morale is low, those who would profit from disorder will seek to increase disorder. Let us hold a spring festival, and, though it is logistically inconvenient, let Ridge attend – in the valley, it may be."

Almost everyone lit up at the suggestion. "And hold open house up here after we get back!" said Wilson, out of turn.

"Is that an amendment?" asked Avery, signing hurriedly.

"Umm, sure."

"We'll have to consider it separately; there might be security considerations. Mary? You look unconvinced."

"Oh, well. 'Bread and circuses.'"

"I'm not sure I know the reference but I can guess its meaning. So, I sense Emilio has a proposal – " Avery looked to Ro-eena.

She summed up. "Let us hold a spring festival, and let Ridge attend."

"Discussion?" All eyes followed Avery's to Mary's.

Mary waved her hand. "It's a start. Gotta check our pulse sometime."

"Well, if there's consensus – Emilio, how shall we present this idea without a prior scheduled GM?"

Emilio considered. "From us here, this should not come. I will see if Juanita will like to have a great idea."

"Settled? Amendment?"

"Lots of decisions have been made in council lately," offered Wilson. "And this isn't really even council. So, let's have this festival, and then an open house, and schedule a GM, get everything out into th' open and winnowed, then we can all buckle down an' try not to starve next winter."

"I like it. Consensus on that?"

Nods all round.

"All right. Item four – armory."

Billee sat in the shade of a boulder, and Karen leaned back against it. The upper valley of the Calapooia wound east into the hills at their feet. Out of sight to the right, both knew, the hole in the ground that had been the Lawsons' house was already healing, carpeted with new fireweed. Across the river, three buzzards sailed lazily in an updraft, and near them a hawk flew steadily off, pestered by a small blackbird, toward the distant hills.

Karen inhaled the strange, to her, air of the heights. A sachet of lichens, mosses, and May flowers, vaporized by an unrelenting sun, hung round the summit.

"Like it?" asked Billee.

"Of course. It's not much like the Creek, is it?"

"No; Mr. Avery says it's a different buy-home."

"Biome.' One word; means the plants and animals here have to meet different conditions, so they're a different mix."

"Uh-huh. Whatever, it smells like my-home to me."

"You've lived here for some time."

"All my life. Don't remember any place else."

"Your folks?"

"What folks I have are the Ridge crew, and now you and all the Marys'. I was found *way* little –" she made a pinching gesture with her thumb and forefinger – and brought to Ridge because one of the girls that was here then had lost a baby."

"She adopted you?"

"No, just fed me till I could get onto solid food. Then she moved back to Bledsoes."

"Oh."

"Yeah, 'Oh.' So, I've been underfoot ever since."

"And you're –what – thirteen now, and a war vet, and marriageable age."

"Huh! I don't know my age. Lotsa foundees here don't. Well, everybody is in the habit of thinking I'm still, I dunno, *five* or something. I was the only kid, except for Mo-reen, and they all acted like *she* was a grown-up from th' git-go."

Billee stood up, leaning on her bow. "Mr. Avery, I think, he sees me as a – repeat? Umm, one thing for another, that's lost?"

"Substitute?"

"Yeah, substitute Mo-reen, but in a little-girl way. Mo-reen was a *soldier*, she got around, she got responsibility; I got to go peek over th' hill and run back, over an' over. I maybe shouldn't complain; it feeds me an' I *like* the hillside. But, mmh, I got stuff in me I never get to show."

"Maybe I'd be, in your place, glad I never had to show it."

Billee's eyes widened. "Oh, well, *you've* been around enough to last anybody."

"Billee, get this. Almost *none* of it has been *fun*. I sense what you think you need; and trust me, once you get there, maybe it will taste just like yesterday's ashes. That's if you're *lucky*. Mo-reen wasn't."

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"Item five. Karen ... ?" Avery raised his eyebrow at Dr. Mary.

"That face you make; I assume it means I have th' floor," she said, sardonically. "Well, I just want to do a little confessing, s'all, and we can get back to Selk, and then Wilson. Good?"

"Sure, Mary, what's to 'confess'?" asked Avery, both eyebrows lifted.

"Well, *that girl*, I see her as prone to court risks. She runs out and gets her arm blown off when I'm looking for her, then I find her, then she goes home for a 'weekend', sends me a runner asking for an extension, I grant it and it runs to *three* weeks, and she comes back a *widow*, and starts barfing all over the lab, and I find out I've got to re-rig to keep her further away from the fumes, which is the very stuff that's her *work*."

Elsa, Wilson, Ellen and Emilio all opened their mouths at once. Mary held up her hand, palm out.

"I *know*, I'm just describing how it looked inside my wonky old head, 'K? So I blew up. Substance, if any, was she's a soldier and a scientist and how did getting knocked up fit into her mission. And she says ... hang on a minute ... I never forget this ... " Mary's eyes watered up, a new sight to those present.

"What?" asked Avery, softly.

"... says, 'we soldier and science for the Creek, yes, ma'am?' and I said, 'well, yeah.' And she puts her hand on her bump and says, 'well, ma'am, *this* is the Creek.'"

Wilson grinned. "That does sound like her."

"So, anyway," Mary went on, "just so ya know, as I was never married and never had kids and was just starting to think I'd kinda adopted one ... well, I just hit *panic* mode." She placed her hands on the arms of her wheelchair and glared across the table.

Avery rolled his eyes, then signed to Ro-eena.

"I take it there was no AWOL."

"Oh, we see-sawed back and forth and then Emilio here intervened for th' kid. She's in th' clear. Just sayin', we hit a rough patch an' it was *my* doin'." *And I'm not about to tell you I spent decades trying to get pregnant myself.*

Ellen reached across and – a bit apprehensively – patted Mary's hand. "So, you're confessing you're about to become a grandmother."

Mary almost crumpled – but held herself together. "Wise ass."
"Umm, is this over?" asked Avery. "Okay, good. Item six."
Everyone turned to Selk.

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"I do not very much see the point of keeping him alive, my lord. He has been a danger to you for years. He recruited half the able-bodied young men in the area for his little bid for parity. Had it worked, they would have come here to conquer *you*. That is a given. And now you are short of forces."

She lifted the porcelain cup to her pursed lips and paused, inhaling the aroma of coffee. It had been vacuum packed before the Undoing – at least twenty years ago; but it would have to do. Everything, nowadays, would have to do. The morning sun glinted from her auburn tresses and pearl earrings as she shook her head.

If, he thought, and not for the first time, she could have had that pronounced nose and that bit of overbite worked on in days gone by, she'd have been the beauty of the age. But then, her tastes being what they are, that smile would always have been chilling. I like it; not many would – or do. "My dear, that's why I enjoy havin' ya around. You're direct; and your calculation of the human equation is precise."

He looked past her at his own reflection. *Not that I'm a prize – not in that way.* Stoop-shouldered, slightly paunched, hair thinned almost to the vanishing point, the unremarkable-looking man in suspenders that peered back at him from the refectory window wore bifocals that were not even his own prescription – where would one find an optometrist now? Perhaps there would be one in Port Land, if he could ever extend his sphere of influence that far. Everything, except his own will to power, remained forever slightly out of focus, and lent to his eyelids that slightly swollen and red-rimmed look that belongs to those with insomnia. Yet he had always slept the sleep of the righteous. *Not in that way; but power is its own aphrodisiac.*

Shifting his vision, he looked briefly though the window at the activity in the courtyard. Two of his more trusted men, former Kluxers, were conducting routine maintenance on an old Army truck. On its flatbed, covered by a canopy of old blue tarps, stood a diesel generator, idling gently round the clock. It sipped at a fuel line from one of hundreds of barrels of fuel – the source of much of his regional hegemony – and converted the oil, with dreadful inefficiency but great practicality, into electricity for the old base headquarters.

Beyond the truck, under armed guard, sat his great pride and joy – a functional LAV-35, which the Army must have requisitioned from the Marines in that last brief war.

"We tested the chain gun a few days ago," he remarked.

"Really? I did not hear it." She lifted her plucked eyebrows at him across her cup.

"You were in the cell block, Doctor, training your A & P students. It's well sound-proofed there, as ya know. The Army, back in the day, was sensitive about the carrying distance of screams. I, ah, tested that m'self," he added wryly, almost reaching to touch, through his white cambric shirt, the scars he still bore.

"So. Did all shells function?" She set down the cup and attacked, with a silver fork, a plateful of scrambled ostrich egg.

"Ignition of all three primers and explosion of all three rounds – on target, I might add. Destroyed a little outcrop on the Butte. You woulda wondered at the fire it made – scorched half an acre. Some of the boys had roast rattlesnake for breakfast yesterday." He lifted a forkful of fried chevon, and chewed slowly. "Still a bit of smoke drifting around."

"Then my old scheme of rounding up all dessicants in the remains of the city and packing them into the munitions bunker has borne fruit." She smiled that crooked smile.

"Yes, and you are to be thanked, honored, admired, adored, and elevated to a place of worship by all the Volunteers."

"You are flattering, my lord, but I know well I am but to be tolerated by them. Yours is a *very* male enclave. But as to your prisoner. He should not live."

"I understand ya; but he's been to two places of interest."

"And they are?"

"A source of small arms in working condition, with *good* ammunition. This is real clear from the weapon he hid in the brush when he moved on our outpost. This fits in with what he did tell Mullins. I'd like to have that source. It would help us in our balance of power with the Eastern Tribes. That treaty has held, but as you know, it's shaky. There are far more of them than there are of us, and we haven't quite the leverage to simply assimilate them as yet."

"The other?"

"He's clearly been near the DARPA facility that we found on th' Army's maps. There are people in possession."

"Ooh."

"Exactly. What that was for, I have no idea, but the little documentation I've uncovered suggests there'd have been an independent power source. We haven't the manpower or the expertise – yet – to rebuild any full-size dynamos. If it can be acquired and put in service, I want it."

"Did he see the actual site?"

"I have no idea as yet. These two things he has chosen not to report; it could be vital information."

A fly touched down on the Formica tabletop and began creeping

hopefully toward the unfinished egg. The Doctor watched it for a few seconds, then suddenly clapped her hands together, directly behind and above the crawling fly, which leaped to its death between her palms. She shook the tiny corpse off onto the tiled floor and reached for a sanitary wipe. "I begin to see how it is," she said. "Your man hopes to find some form of leverage in what he has withheld, or hopes yet to escape and make good the knowledge in some way, independent of you – or worse, and this is what I have believed all along, and why I have urged his termination – he has come here to depose you and assume lordship himself."

"With all that I am in agreement, dear Doctor, and it's why he has been so closely held."

"With all due respect, my lord, your Volunteers should be able to canvass the northern reaches just as he did, and, if not find the weapons, at least invest the power plant, saving your invaluable fuel oil for transportation and enforcement work."

"And it may easily come to just that, honey. Are you going to finish those eggs?"

She offered him the plate. He reached for her fork with one hand and a bottle of syrup with the other. "The problem is that as Wolf got near that power plant, he lost exactly thirty good men, a shotgun, and a pistol in about four days. It's not *like* him. Something's up with that place. I don't want *my* army to go in there blind if I can help it."

The Doctor winced at her lord's table manners; she pulled a paper napkin from the booth's dispenser, unfolded it and dropped it in his lap. "Well, then, we will place every resource at your disposal, my lord."

Absent-mindedly, he thanked her for the napkin. "As to resources, why, you always have, my dear; wouldn't have it any other way. And, oh, my, I do thank you for your supervision of the prisoner; the intravenous feeding has been a help. Now, has he had his preliminary dose yet?"

"Yes, my lord; we used the phencyclidine we found in the veterinary building at the animal park. I was surprised to see it there; it is very stressful for the animals. You might know it as angel dust. One-tenth CC of that concentration will have given him a most extraordinary night, after these weeks of sensory deprivation, and he should be ready for the SP-117, at your convenience."

He cracked his broadest smile, the one that had made him a success in the showroom to the very end, when even the rich had begun at last to doubt the eventual utility of automobiles.

"My dear, you are the marvel of the age."

"But of course, my lord."

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So much darkness. Days? Weeks? Have I always been here?

So much darkness.

There had been dreams. Dreams, and dreams of dreams. As when a wasp has laid its egg within the egg of another wasp's egg, within the egg of a butterfly, on a leaf that is being consumed by aphids driven by ants, his dreams had fed upon one another until he felt there was little left of him but dreamshit, if there were such a thing.

Trees, smoke, vapors, mud, screams, maniac laughter. Scarlet armies of red beasts marching round and round on elevated roadways past tongues of violet flame – and had he not slaked his thirst on the hot blood of a deer, and run, run through the forest, pursued by angry, yelping corpses, all of whom answered to the name of Cougar? And then one of them raised the Glock and shot him in the shoulder.

He blinked his eyes. No blindfold. But nothing was to be seen, not even a crack under a door, and there was no draft.

A last dream passed brilliantly before his mind. He felt his face lengthen, his eyes shift round to the sides of his head, and his arms and fingers stretch and fledge to left and right. He leapt into the air, leaving behind one black tail feather. Spiraling higher and higher on the updraft, he could see the North-Running River far below, with its islands, its sweepers and deadheads and pilings, its sandbars and gravel bars and willow shores, its suckerfish, carp, and dead or dying salmon, and its foraging raccoons, bears, and ospreys. In the shallows, green with algae, lay a skull, a human skull, rocked by the backwash of a slime-befouled countercurrent, and from the shattered left eye-socket crawled some tiny insect, which suddenly curled in upon itself and fell, an unremarkable fleck, to drift down-dream along the steaming verge.

"Wolf."

"Magee??"

"How do you feel?"

"Like shit."

A chuckle. *What direction is he? It sounds like he's everywhere at once. But I suppose that's the idea.*

"Well, son, you should. Think about it; you woo away the best men, setting me back a year at least, then, by your own testimony, get them all killed and abandon them; *then*, of all places, you come straight back to *me*. Reprehensible, suspicious and foolish behavior?"

"Yes sir, it must look that way."

"Well, it kind of does."

A pause, then the familiar, smooth voice resumed.

"Mullins still thinks highly of you; even though you've got him in trouble as well as yourself. You have charisma, Wolf; all you lack is *reliability*."

Play it close to the grain. "Well, sir, I might have other lacks."

"Mmh-h-h?"

"I'm strong on tactics, weak on strategy?"

"Heh heh, heh, heh, same thing in different words. Wolf, *I* told you that years ago."

"Yes, sir, you did, sir."

"I've told you many things, Wolf."

"Yes, sir."

"I put a lot of effort into you."

"You did, sir."

"A son – you were a son to me. I saw potential. *I still* see potential. But I'm damned if I know how we're going to get there

"Sir?"

"Well, back to our program, here. How do you feel?"

What's he doing?

"Wolf, a little introspection, please. *What* do you feel? Other than, say, anger, fear, all that."

Oh. "Uh-h-h, shackles. Sore wrists and ankles. Cold butt."

"Anything else?"

"Headache ... sore shoulder?"

"Bingo, my lad. Why would your shoulder be sore?"

"I've been hit? Shot?"

"This darkness is putting your senses a little out of true, Wolf. *Shot* comes close. You've had an injection. Any idea what?"

"Sir? I mean, would it be anything like what th' Army used on us?"

"Very good, Wolf. Yes, we were their prisoners, and they did give us injections – when they only *talked* with us. 'Sodium pent,' I think, was their name for what they had, and it did loosen our tongues a little. My boy, I have no idea why they didn't simply expunge us afterward. It's what *I* would have done. I think things got a little busy for them right about then."

"So, I've got sodium pent in me? Th' truth drug?" A pause. "Sir?"

"Thank you for remembering, Wolf. No, we don't have any, and besides, I'm not sure it's the best stuff anyway. But, yah, a *truth* drug. What was it called, Doctor?"

A voice, indistinct, seemed to reply.

"SP ... one? one-seventeen. Thank you, Doctor. In answer to your question, my boy, something Russian."

"Russian?"

"Soviet, really. Almost a century old, the formula. But the supply was kept up until – well, the expiration date on the bottle is '31. Let's hope it's been stable."

"I don't remember any shot."

"You wouldn't; we administered it while you were napping."



"Oh..."

The other voice – was it a woman's? – murmured again.

"Ah, Wolf, I'm reminded to mention that we can't read any of the rest of the label very well. It's in Cyrillic, of course. But the 117 and

the expiration date are clearly marked, and we have unimpeachable provenance. We're excited about our find, and we thought, as you are our most interesting case at present, we'd give ya the honor of being the first to try it out. Perhaps even make y'self useful, y'see."

"Why ... why tell *me* all this?"

A sound of papers shuffling.

"Mmh? Oh, well, Wolf, not to allow you a sense of over-importance, and, I'm told, results are often improved if we're candid with those whom we expect to be candid with us. The placebo effect when combined with the real thing should help us get – over the hump, shall we say. Thank you, my dear."

This last sounded as if it were said to someone else. The room – if it was a room – absolutely no light anywhere – suddenly filled, from all directions, with the sound of someone drinking from a glass. Wolf became aware of his own thirst, which intensified every moment.

After what seemed an eternity in Wolf's increasing disorientation – was he lying down or standing against a wall? Was this even The Hole or another location entirely? – Magee's voice came from everywhere again.

"So, we have here Mullins' visit with you, wi' your vague account of your movements from last summer till now. And we have some independent information to collate wi' yours. I'd like to begin with where you get your firearms and stable ammunition."

"What about 'em?"

Immediately a jagged, searing jolt passed through Wolf. With effort, he suppressed a yelp. A taste of salt ran over his tongue from a bitten lip.

"Please. Surely, *you* would not expect us to waste our valuable time dancing round these questions in semantic circles. Yes, Wolf, your shackles are wired, and yes, we do have current. See, I have answered your unasked questions – you might choose to treat me as fairly. But I'll be clear. Where did you collect these firearms, which we know did not come from *our* inventory?"

"Ah-h-h-h, eff you."

"Heh. See, I didn't reach right for the button, now did I? For *you*, I bend over backwards. Pain is boring for torturers, and so they become careless and the extracted information is often useless. Why, if this were a novel, most readers would abandon the story at this point; even *they* would become bored. So, let's get on with our story, shall we? We've both been to this point before, my son – at the Army's hands right here – we learned from the best – and later, as interrogators, we practiced this art ourselves. I *was* good at resisting; but I admit I'm a little old for that now. But at putting the question, I was, and still am, the acknowledged master."

The drinking sound again. Damn that sound!

"Wolf, my son – I do feel toward you as a father – resistance is always in pursuit of a goal, just as for interrogation. Your goal, as I have observed it over time, has been unwaveringly limited: self-preservation. You wish to keep options open – to have a future. And that's *all*. Sometimes I find you frighteningly small-minded. With me, there is a *bit* more. *I* wish to bring some order out of the chaos we have around us today. To re-establish sound government, agriculture, manufacturing, and trade. And, umm, health care. To create, as it were, a reign of peace at last, in place of the endless wars between our little tribes. I'll give you, gratis, another little glimpse of truth. We've been talking with the tribes east of the mountains. There may now be sufficient manpower to tame the regions around us and bring light to this dark age. To begin, as it were, history again. "To clear away darkness from the land, and from the blood of men" as the Klux Lord himself used to tell us. But the horsemen are like you, Wolf – self-interested, self-limiting and extremely dangerous. The Volunteers need sufficient arms to counterbalance the numbers of the East. Interesting?"

"Maybe."

"Well, *that* was honest. So. Where did you collect your firearms?"

"At a gun store."

"Disingenuous. Gun stores were the first to go, even before the grocery stores."

"They'd sealed and disguised it, hoping to return is my guess."

"Ah! At last, some conversation. *Where*, Wolf?"

Wolf felt red rage rising from some last shred of self. He struggled to remain silent, but a desire to be helpful, against his own perceived interests, filled the darkness around him – or was it within him? Was this the drug? If he did not quickly express something to the contrary, he would blurt everything!

"Mine, dammit! *I* found it, s'mine!"

"Mmh, honesty again. Very good. But, Wolf! That was a *moral* judgment. Childish, too, especially in context. What, in all our world today, *belongs* to anyone without present possession? But my hand over th' power switch here is gettin' heavy. *Where*?"

The answer was now on the tip of Wolf's tongue, like a drop of hot lead burning to be spit out. He choked it down and almost whispered.

"...mine..."

"Okay, well. We tried. Such a waste. *I am* disappointed in this Russkie stuff. But especially I am disappointed in you. We'll just have to save the world without ya; you'll be missed, Wolf, you really will. Doctor, it's yours to play with now. But don't let it live any longer than necessary."

"Thank you, my lord," said the female voice.

"Just curiosity, what did ya have in mind to do with it?"

"Vivisection. I do have my anatomy students right next door. Their instruments are at hand and they've been practicing on a lovely piglet, which will appear on tonight's menu."

"Sounds great – could do with pork chops for a change."

Noises, which were trivial in themselves, came at Wolf from all directions. Two people – more? – were getting up from chairs, papers were being shuffled. Footsteps.

Surprisingly, what occurred to Wolf now was the image of the red-haired Communist his men had tortured –and probably raped. Even she, if she'd made it through the battle alive, still had options. He, Wolf, would have none at all.

"Uhh, okay."

Magee's voice seemed to come from a great distance. "Did it say something?"

"I said, *okay*. Couldya maybe come back and talk wi'me some more? ... please?"

∴

Karen looked in – hesitantly – at Avery's open door as she went by. He looked surprisingly approachable. "Do you ever sleep, sir?"

Avery's table was placed so that he faced the door. One seldom saw his back – a habit he shared with, among others, Karen. He looked up from the inventories he'd been perusing – written in old spiral-bound notebooks, the pages of which were already yellowing with age.

"Come in. Sometimes one doesn't. I have trouble with these – " he gestured with his chin toward his foreshortened legs – "and that keeps me awake me to keep up with these – " he indicated the lists – "which are another kind of troubles, and so there you are."

Footsteps approached softly down the dimly lit corridor. Karen looked back, and saw that it was Wilson, dressed for night stealth and wearing the Ruger Old Army in a holster. He nodded to her, obviously heading for the same door, so she accepted Avery's invitation, more to avoid blocking the doorway than for any other reason.

Wilson knocked, and, without really awaiting an answer, stepped in.

"Shift over?" asked Avery.

"Mm-hmm, the kid's on. Skipping down the mountain with her new toy."

Avery looked over to Karen. "Would you like to sit down?"

"Thank you."

Wilson, not needing an invitation, did the same.

"New toy?" asked Karen.

"Twenty-two rifle. One of the single shots, with some 'a your new 'shorts'. Does still have her bow, though."

"What would be much better than rifles," offered Avery, "at this stage of the game, is radios. Our scouts' vulnerability at these

distances is, frankly, nerve-wracking."

"There just aren't enough of us to make or salvage everything we want. You know the drill, more than anybody – to *grow* the food, y'gotta be a farmer. To *have* the food, y'gotta be a miller, or a carter, or a warehouser. To *keep* th' food, y'gotta be a guard. Mary's down to a skeleton crew now as it is."

"And out of a hundred and twenty people – plus around fifty next door, with their own problems – every guard one less farmer, and vice versa. How did we talk ourselves into having a summer *festival*?" Avery rolled his eyes, something Karen had not seen before. She'd found Avery inexpressive and rather forbidding – like a bird of prey, brooding over the heights with his binoculars.

"Morale *is* low, you know," she put in.

"It *should* be. We've already had two heat waves, and a lot of crops are going to be very thin. We're resorting to hunting and making pemmican, and trapping and drying fish – *salt* would be nice to have. The cattle program doesn't seem to be going anywhere – calves either not making it, or that effing wolf pack finding them – and everybody acts like running wiring for irrigation is going to save the day. But what's to irrigate when the oats and barley are already burnt? And who has the time to set up the pumps?"

"Sir, if I may, the orchard *could* use a pump. Apples and pears have set fruit well this year, and those can be dried to help get through the winter – if they get enough water now to make weight."

Avery looked at Karen as if he'd never really seen her before. "Is there *anything* you don't know how to do?"

Wilson chuckled. "Lots, I'm sure. But she trained a bit in the orchards last fall, so ..."

Karen nodded. "Allyn ... he ... thought highly of tree crops, and spent time making sure we could carry on. But, of course, if the weather gets much more extreme, those can fail us, too."

"Damn," said Avery. Setting his hands on the table to either side of the stack of notebooks, he looked into Karen's face, then Wilson's. "I don't mind admitting, things are kind of not adding up." He waved one hand over the notebooks. "Not enough oats, barley, or wheat here in the granary, and little prospect of enough coming in. Something's the matter with our animal husbandry, there's trouble with the potatoes, insufficient labor to divert into keeping us in some kind of clothes, not to mention getting in properly cured firewood, raw material for making gunpowder in short supply. Even these things –" he flicked the light bulb in his desk lamp – "the ones that work, are in shorter supply than anyone expected, and half of Ridge is back to alky lamps. Which I suspect you," he half smiled at Wilson, "of draining down for your own purposes."

"Hey!" But Wilson smiled in return. Karen could see they were

close friends. How much had she missed of life at Ridge, hunched over her work counter in the Armory?

"Shoe fits?" Avery went on. "But, seriously, there's little enough alcohol we can make, as there's no sugar other than in fruit juices and beets, and hardly any honey. Same story in category after category. We're not *middle class* here any more, which is what people really want to be. We're barely hanging on. None of us wants to admit it, but all of us, where we're going in two generations, it's a stone age culture living in a couple of longhouses. Something like Roundhouse now, only more so."

Wilson glanced at Karen. "You look shocked, kid. Well, maybe half shocked. But somebody was going to say it sooner or later."

Karen unconsciously pawed at her frowzy hair – why did she itch so? – and stared at the wall a moment. "Well, you're right. It does hurt to hear it. But you can see the blackberries taking over, and the wolves and 'yotes moving in on the sheep, and half the houses empty. If we were hit again like last October, we would, umm, lose, wouldn't we?"

"We might. Might not. Your little bullets could count for a lot. We're going to start training on them soon."

"At only sixty percent reliability?"

"Hey, it was forty a month ago. See? We think that's a great advance over the bows for keeping bandits at arm's length. You might go 'click' or you might go 'bang.' Either way they have to use cover or faith to get close, because any one of your shots might be real."

Avery cut in. "Speaking of training, Karen, I know you're a veteran, but have you been working on adjusting your skills?"

She looked, involuntarily, down at her left shoulder. "Well, I turned in the pistol – can't rack the slide now. And I gave away my bow – and gave Aleesha's to Billee. I've been doing exercises with the sword – but I'm not really happy with it."

"No," Wilson said. "You wouldn't be. You have no two-handed stroke, and a lot of the power in one-hand swordplay still relies on the weight of an arm on the other side, with a shield, perhaps. Similar problems with staff, javelin, bush-hook, axe and spear. Got your little knife with you?"

Karen drew it, reversed it with a little flip, and handed it to him handle first.

Wilson looked it over. "Ever killed anybody with this?"

"Yes."

Wilson's eyebrows might have moved a little bit, but not much. "Mmh. Hefty for its size, sharp, and clean. Not really suitable for throwing, is it?"

"Well, it's a skinner. And I'd be uncomfortable letting it get away from me like that."

"Sure. Avery here is a natural with throwing knives – but, again, a

lot of his power comes from having both arms –which in his case *are* pretty powerful."

"That's because my hands do all my walking." Avery smiled again, patting the black tires of his chair wheels.

"But, let's see ..." Wilson went on. "You've got the one knife on the right, suitable for close-in work, and the short sword I think you carry on the left. Drawing is a little tough for you on both sides. You reach across for the sword?"

"No, I've been carrying it between my shoulder blades."

"Oh, okay. And you draw behind your head. Yes, that's better. Did you draw arrows there too?"

"No, I was really used to carrying them in a quiver on my waist, behind the knife sheath, and drawing them like this." She demonstrated, with her hand behind her right hip.

"Bow was in the left hand. Right." Wilson winced, in spite of himself. This girl had lost much of who she'd been. "Well, when you drew the knife just now you had to kind of twist yourself back a little bit, and I noticed you thumbed your sheath a little to unseat the blade. All this slows you down just a hair, not that most people would notice." He looked down at Avery's table, set down the knife, and picked up a long pencil and a ruler. He tucked the pencil in Karen's empty sheath, and waved the ruler around as if it were a long knife or short sword. "Let's say I'm a bandit and I've gotten past all your projectile defenses and am closing with you, like this." He stepped toward Karen in slow motion, mock-menacingly.

Karen, trying to match the unaccustomed speed, stepped inside Wilson's reach, drawing the pencil, and, turning the "handle" in her palm habitually, so that the "blade" faced outward, drew it across his throat as she continued past him on his right, dodging the descending ruler.

"Very nice," noted Avery. "once."

"By which he means that trick works on anyone who's never seen you do that before, but if there were two assailants, you'd need another tactic to take on the second one," offered Wilson. "In fact it would have worked on *me* just now. I assume the reason you rolled the pencil just before you got me, was so the 'blade' would face outward as your hand came up, blade downward from your fist."

"Umm ... yes." Karen wondered where all this was tending.

"Okay, could I make some recommendations?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm hoping we can get you to ditch the sword – Bobbo would love to have it – and pick out a longer knife for carry than your skinner, with a fitted sheath and a sheath lanyard. If the sheath's tied to your leg, you won't have to hitch like you did just now, to draw it. And both edges should be sharp, and a tapered point – not a stiletto, but, still, a

fighting knife with some of the qualities of your sword – still able to make that little move you just did, and without rotating it – just straight out of the sheath and across my throat here. But with options for parrying and thrusting as well."

He swapped her the knife for the pencil, and she re-sheathed the knife. "Yes, sir."

"Come by my 'place' tomorrow afternoon, we'll fit you out and also do a little practice. Don't expect too much from the practice, though; your center of gravity is going to be moving around for a few months." He grinned. "We're looking down the road here a bit. No serious hand-to-hand for awhile either; throws, kicks, all that. But soon enough; after you've had the kid. Now, I expect you'll want to carry your knife on the right, use the same moves as much as you can, at least at first ..."

"Yes, sir."

"... and where did you keep the little pistol?"

"In an inside pocket sewn into the jerkin. Before I was here, in a pocket in my hoodie."

"Hoodie'? Never mind. No holster, then?"

"There was a little zipper bag."

"Right. Well, what I want you to consider – there are a number of twenty-twos in stock here, gathered years ago. Enough to arm a good twenty Creekers. I've got an ancient revolver, six inch barrel, chambered for nine rounds – it's in good shape and has a leather holster for a right-hander. Want you to try it on and try it out, cross-draw." He saw her hesitation. "Dry-fire only, of course. Don't want to scare th' baby – unless we have to. 'K? Tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir. Umm, I go, now?"

"Sure," said Avery. "Thanks for dropping by."

"Y'welcome." Karen disappeared into the dim hall.

Wilson smiled at Avery. "Not very garrulous, is she?"

"Well, sometimes neither am I, Wilson. She and I are a lot alike in many ways, I expect."

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Karen walked down the stairs and around to the main 'gate'. Millie lay asleep, dressed and armed, in a bunk by the main door, with a string tied round her wrist which was attached to the door. Simple but effective; if anyone outside somehow opened the massive cantilevered door, she'd awaken and become a force to be reckoned with. At the same time, of course, the lights would snap on, on all levels, and a buzzer would summon everyone. At Karen's almost noiseless approach, Millie opened her eyes and rolled over into a half-sitting position. "Hi."

"Hello; not to bother you but can I go out for a bit?"

"Sure; help yourself to the postern door. There's cloaks on the pegs; borrow mine – green, with a blue border." Millie checked the clock on the nearby wall. "My shift's almost over; you didn't bother me."

"Thanks." Karen stepped around and reached for the cloak. The peg next to it was empty. "Is anyone else out there?"

"Mm-hmm, Selk. He's up at all hours and likes to look at the stars."

Karen nodded, awkwardly fastened the cloak at her throat with her one hand, then pushed on the thick postern door, and stepped outside. It swung itself shut behind her.

The air was cool, but not especially cold, even here on the heights. As soon as Karen's eyes adjusted, she sought the gravel of the summit path with her feet and trudged cautiously round to the right, below the narrow, massive windows of Avery Murchison's outpost, which were still dimly lit. She could see, by a surprisingly bright three-quarters moon, the dark surrounding hills. A flat ribbon of silver fog hid the Creek. There was no wind. It would be another hot day tomorrow – today – outside.

"Who's there?" Selk's querulous voice came from further round to the right.

"Karen, Ames." She found him sitting on a boulder above the southern slope of the ridge. "Don't shoot me, 'k?"

"Shoot you? I've ... umm ... never shot anybody; doubt if I could. You, on the other hand ... "

"Yes, I know; Karen the Dragon Lady. Eats bandits for breakfast. I'm not as fierce as I'm cracked up to be. May I sit down?"

"Uh? Oh ... sure, right here to my left there's a good spot. 'Cracked up', that's a good expression."

She sat on the boulder, which was taller than it looked in the moonlight. Her feet dangled just out of reach of the ground. Just as well; she wondered if that was poison oak growing along its base.

"So ... just out for some ... some air?" asked Selk.

"Yes. It's stuffy in there, even with the fans going. Which I'm told are a great improvement over how it's been all these years."

"Uh huh. I can't imagine. Mr. Avery, Bee and Bobbo and Millie, Wilson and all – they've been like cave dwellers."

"Mmh. We still are, really. And you? Air?"

"No. I, uhh, I like to look at the sky. The, the night sky."

"I heard about your report. So, you really think the Ridge was about a satellite?"

"Well, there were the pictures, of Mr. Angle's, that the bandit had looked at. I have them. And ... and, there was a dish that they had here, on top of the control room, and it was always pointed south."

"South is significant?"

"Well – You've seen satellites, right?"

"The Wanderers, the Creekers call them. Fewer every year, it

seems. Yes. I read about them, when I was 'at school' in the basement. And then I saw them, sometimes, over the last couple of years. But they go every which way."

"That's right; in fact, there's one now."

Selk indicated a planetary point of light drifting in a straight line from south to north, waxing and waning as it went. They craned their necks to watch it pass out of sight in the vicinity of Polaris.

"That one," said Selk, "is tumbling out of control, I think; once every about six seconds. We're seeing it by the light of the sun, which is to our east right now – rising in a couple of hours. That's to say – " he cleared his throat, removed his glasses, and polished them with his sleeve, then pushed them back over his nose – "we're, we're rotating toward it. That way."

"Once every twenty-four hours, in a circle, on the surface of the earth. Hence the sunrise."

"Yes! Would you believe it, most Creekers don't know that any more? Or anyways care. They think the sun's *coming up* when it 'comes up' – we're all the way back to a *flat* earth in the human mind."

"Yes, I've noticed that, too."

"I can't explain it to them as otherwise; they just shrug and get on with the things that matter to them – crops, irrigation."

"But, you know, those *are* the things that matter now," offered Karen gently.

"I was born too late," Selk said, bitterly. "Well, anyway, satellites, you'd know from your reading, a lot of 'em are in low orbits – low being, say a hundred to a hundred and twenty miles up, and to stay in orbit, they have to balance the earth's gravity by going 17,500 miles an hour, or something close to that. Centrifugal force."

"Yes. But they're all dead, aren't they? And falling out of the sky, one by one?"

"The low-earth-orbit ones, yes; and the MEOs, which I think were mostly GPS – "

"Those died before we were born."

" – were *killed* before we were born; hunter-killer sats and solar storms. But some of the Clarkes were well shielded from storms."

"Clarkes?"

"Clarke-orbit satellites."

"Oh, geostationary."

"Right. God, it helps to have someone who has *any* idea.

Geostationary. The antenna they had here was always pointed *south*."

"South because ... "

"Because that's where you see geostationaries from here. They're above the equator."

"Oh, that's right. So, you're thinking there might be a functional satellite up there – " Karen pointed at the southern sky – "and that

Ridge had something to do with it?"

"Yep. And furthermore I think it's big. If I only had a telescope – like the one at Ball Butte – I bet I could find it."

"How? Wouldn't it look like a star? It would be – what, twenty thousand miles away."

"Further, more like 22,240 miles up from the equator, and we're about forty-three degrees north of there. No, the earth wobbles. What I'd be looking for would change its position slightly all the time – like a figure eight. But nobody wants to help me with this thing – say it's a wild goose chase. My proposal, you know – they said – they said, 'work on it in your spare time.' hah!"

"If you saw one, how would you know it's the right one?"

"You're right, there were lots of them. But I have to start *somewhere*. Once I've got some sense of direction I could set up a dish and try to get some conversation going."

"You should talk to Billee."

"*Billee*?" Selk snorted. "Why Bee? She can't sit still to hear word one from me."

Karen smiled, even though she was getting cold in the pre-dawn air. She pulled the cloak closer about her. "Billee has a pair of field glasses that might have the magnification you need."

"*Field* glasses? I don't know ..."

They're ten-ex or something like that. With a huge field of view. The bandits took them from her, but Huskey got them back. I'm sure she'd let you use them. ... if you were to ask *nice*ly."

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"What's in here?" Karen lifted the edge of the cloth on the basket and sniffed.

"Barley cakes – they are the best we can do," replied Juanita. "But they do have in them the dried grapes from last year. That may be what you are smelling."

"'Raisins,' they used to be called. It's enticing," admitted Karen.

"We have cut back at Ridge, too; I haven't seen anything so nice in a while. You're a wonder."

"Everyone is a wonder," said Emilio, as he packed apple fritters in another basket. "All through the Creek there are kitchens turning out something from nothing, I believe. We will have a good party, I think."

David, one of the twins, came in through the back door. As Juanita handed him the basket of cakes, he turned to Karen. "Whatcha been doing?"

She looked at him, surprised. "Whoa, you've grown up! Nice mustache. Not so much; we have a little production line going; BP

rimfire, some proper grenades, wooden water pipes and hydraulic rams, better matches, and some stuff for painting roofs."

"Roofs?"

"Yes, all our old roofs were too dark and also not fire resistant; the steel roofing that was stockpiled is going on over the shingling, but most of it is dark red or green. What with all the heat, we want to find ways to keep the houses cooler, not just fireproof. So we want to get everyone to paint the roofs white, not just the walls, and also to weave mats for the outsides of south-facing windows. The temperatures in these old buildings are getting dangerous for older Creekers – and babies."

"And how is yours?" asked Juanita, smiling.

Karen placed her hand over her new shape. "We're doing well together, so far as I can tell. Anyways, we've stopped throwing up. We're going to stop and see Dr. Marcee on the way to the festival."

"I like that 'we.' You are getting good practice."

The other mustachioed twin, Raoul, appeared in the kitchen doorway. "Jenny's ready," he said.

"Good." Emilio nodded. "Take these, load her up, and go to Hall, and we'll come after with our backpacks."

"Where's everyone else?" asked Karen.

"Errol, as you know, has been supervising the pipelines for the irrigation. I think he is at Bledsoe's; we begin these things there, to ease relations." Emilio made an expression of distaste. "Tomma and Vernie, with help from our visitor, took Mrs. Ames to Hall in the hand cart very early, to beat the heat."

"That must be a tight fit for her. Who's the visitor?"

"A big man named Bolo. He's from Roundhouse. And you are not the only one making babies! He brought with him a pig – a 'sow!'" She will make piglets soon, and he will show us how to take care of them. In return we teach him the transportation of water to crop land." Emilio paused. "He is a very good man, and he does know pigs, but teaching *him* new things takes ... patience."

"We're going now," shouted David from outside the door.

"All right," replied Juanita. "Take advantage of the shade, and rest Jenny twice before you get to Hall."

"How did you bake the cakes, Juanita?" asked Karen.

"Ah, you have caught me! I worked at night, of course. We made fire at midnight, and the baking was done by sunrise."

"It's a good thing we're having the festival now, then. With everything drying up so early, we might have to ban fires completely after midsummer."

"Nita, I think we are ready to go as well," said Emilio, putting on a wide-brimmed straw hat. "Are you going with us, Mrs. Allyn?"

"As far as Hall gate, then up to Chaney's."

"But we will see you in the evening? The Festival begins when the sun sets."

"I think I should be there."

"Everyone should be there. It is really a General Meeting, with food and music, I think."

Along with the others, Karen put on her own small backpack, straw hat and reed-mat cape and moved to the kitchen door. They left the shade of the house reluctantly, following the trail down to the front walk and gate on the Creek road, through which Allyn and Errol had passed carrying armloads of swords, so long ago as it now seemed. They kept to the left side of the road, taking advantage of the shade of the roadside fruit trees, many of which looked heat-blasted already, with curled leaves and tiny apples. The plums and pears had not set fruit at all in the late frosts, and now in the wild swing into summer, had dropped much of their foliage as well. The travelers' feet rustled as they passed along, as if it were a walk in a dry November.

Karen looked, through the morning's haze, at Russell Farm, across the Creek. No one was moving about in the fields. They would have done their work before mid-morning, and would now either be resting in shade, or sitting in their swimming hole in a bend of the Creek. Like New Ames, they would likely have made any preparations for the festival in the cool of the night.

The little group stopped several times, sipping slowly from their switchel bottles in the deeper shade provided by large maple trees. Another group was slowly catching up with them, which Karen recognized as the contingent from Maggie's Farm.

Maggie herself, both tall and old for a Creeker, carried her long-barreled Kentucky rifle cradled in her arms. In a grudging acknowledgment of the heat and glare, she had left her battered kepi at home and was wearing one of the wide-brimmed woven hats and a pair of pre-Undoing sunglasses. Next to her strode the young leader from Roundhouse, with the big dog at his heels.

Maggie nodded to Emilio as they stopped in the shade. "Hot enough to fry an old lady's brains," she croaked, reaching for a leather water bag at her side.

"It is becoming a difficult summer," he replied. He offered his hand to Josep, who shook it firmly. "And how are your people?"

"We are getting by. Though our creek has dropped a lot farther than yours."

The dog flapped her tail a couple of times against Josep's leg, and Karen offered her fingers to her to sniff. Krall's ears and tail drooped, and she looked up at Josep.

He smiled and spoke to his companion. "S'okay, honey, she's one of our pack."

Krall took a tentative step forward and smelled Karen's hand. They

made eye contact, and Krall's tail thumped again.

"This is a beautiful animal," said Karen.

"So are you."

Karen felt a moment of confusion; people at the Creek were sometimes indirect. Josep was clearly not. She decided to smile, but not too broadly, and to keep to her subject.

"She's, mmh, a girl?"

"Bitch is our word," he grinned. "Good bitch too, aren't you, Krall?" She lolled her tongue out and grinned up at him.

"So ... are there boy dogs ... dogs as well as bitches at Roundhouse?"

"Do we breed? Yes. You're not the first to ask! All the puppies from Krall's next litter are spoken for."

"I have a friend who talks a lot about Krall. I have a feeling she wants desperately to ask for a puppy."

"I've heard of her; one of the scouts?"

Karen nodded.

"Will she be at the fair?"

"No, she's one of those providing cover – out in the Big Valley, no doubt."

"Too bad; but somebody has to do it. We have people out, too. But I'll want to meet her, or see that someone from the tribe does."

"That's very kind."

"We want to get off on the right foot. Lots we can all do for each other."

Maggie shifted her water bag and adjusted the strap. "Two of mine are on Ball Butte. Not too happy about it, either. But it has the best view."

"Shall we go?" asked Emilio.

As they took to the blazing sunshine on the dusty road, Karen found the young man and Krall had fallen in beside her.

"I hear stories about you," he said.

"Stories?"

"Yes; you farm, you make stuff, you sew people up, and shoot bad guys. All-around girl."

"If you say so. I think I have had some opportunities."

"Modest, too. When are you due?"

Direct again! She fought an impulse to look at his face.

"Midwinter."

"Oh, good; you'll have better than this weather for lying-in, maybe."

Karen felt her attention had narrowed, and made a conscious effort to scan the nearby fields and fence lines, as she was sure Emilio was doing. Josep did the same. He seemed able to effortlessly maintain his situational awareness and be sociable at the same time, something that

was difficult for Karen.

"It's all right," he said. "I'm not about crowding you; but you're more interesting than you seem to think. I'm taken; my mate's name is Marleena."

Karen found herself relieved to hear this; she had always found friendly men unnerving. "Do you have children?"

His face clouded. "We did; two. There was something the matter with the water. A hot year like this one."

"I'm sorry. Perhaps ..."

"... we may succeed another time. Thank you."

They walked in silence for a bit. Hall was coming into view; and in spite of the grueling sunshine in the courtyard, people could be seen milling about.

"Here we part ways," said Karen. "The others are for hall, but I'm off to Chaney's for a bit."

"Oh, I know that place well. Quarantine. You went through that there, too, didn't you?"

Is there anything he doesn't know about? "Yes. 'Bye, now." She waved toward the others as well. Juanita smiled and waved back.

"See you later, then," said Josep, and offered his hand. Karen shook it, shocked at the strength in his small body, and went her way.

The gate to Chaney's was almost opposite that of Hall. The long, low house was atypical for the Creek; Karen knew from her readings, long ago, that it was called a "bungalow." One thing that set it apart was its exterior, which she remembered as a tan-colored brickwork up to mid-wall. This, however, was now painted white, as was the roof – Chaney's was an early adopter of the new style, in time for the heat waves. Another was the front stoop, which was a concrete pad, with two steps up. Wrought iron railings stood on either side. Karen was grateful for these, and hauled her newly cumbersome self up by them. They were hot to the touch. Perhaps *they* should be painted white as well.

She opened the door and peeped in. "Hello, house?"

"Karen? Come in and sit down. Be right out." That was Marcee's voice.

Karen shucked her hat, cloak, and pack by the door, and found a comfortable chair, glad to be out of the sun. Glancing round, she saw that, inside, little had changed. The big table dominated the center of the room. Behind was the heavy glass window behind which she had lived, briefly, making friends with Mrs. Ames. The place had always been rather Spartan, with little of the cheer she'd found at Ames' or Wilsons'. The thought of those houses, one abandoned to the elements, the other burnt to the ground, panged her.

Marcee came in, moving slowly in the hot room, and sat down heavily in the chair next to Karen's. A spray of her red hair was

plastered to her forehead, and beads of sweat gleamed amid the freckles on her cheekbones. She was wearing an ancient blowsy shift of cotton and rayon, figured in tiny roses, and was looking very – for Marcee – large.

"Whew. Oh Em Gee, it's a rough day to be out, Karen. Don't see how you do it."

"I don't suppose I could, if I were so far along."

"Yeah, I'm due in two moons. It's rough! Especially with Dr. Tom and Elsa trying to cram everything they know into my head, day in, day out." She tilted her head at the open hallway door – no doubt one of the old-timers was listening in; "Dr." Marcee was considered only moderately competent as yet. But considering she had only begun her medical career from scratch at the beginning of the past winter, everyone considered she had come a long way.

"So, you sense any changes?"

"No, the baby is busy most days, as am I."

"You've grown a little bit up front. Still sore?"

"Mm-hmm, and itchy."

"Getting ready to feed the kid. Notice veins more?"

"Yes."

"I think those will get more comfortable for you about now, and you'll be putting on more girth instead. Could I get you to stand up and turn around, move around the room a bit?"

Karen did so.

"You're kind of small still, but normal range. What's all this on the belt?"

"Revolver, knife, ammunition."

"I can see that! Never far away from your stuff. I dunno about the belt there, though."

"You're right; I might have to go with shoulder gear for awhile."

"Smart. Getting enough water?"

"Yes; we have a good well at Ridge."

"That surprises me; isn't the whole thing rock, above the ... umm ...

" "Water table?"

"Yeah, water table." Marcee shifted her weight, unable to find a satisfactory position in her chair.

"The well pipe comes in at an angle, from above the headwaters of Hall Creek."

"Cool! And enough food, lots of variety?"

"Guchi brings us fresh stuff when he can. We had steamed nettles a couple of days ago."

"That's a help. Get lots of dandelions, too, while they last."

"Yes'm."

"My kid should be four months old by the time you pop. I'd be able to walk up to Ridge if I had to. But we might want to have you move

down here after harvest, where we can keep an eye on you; what do you think?"

"Umm ..."

"Got people who want to be there for you?"

"Billee. And, mmm, Wilson."

"Wilson! That man's full of surprises."

"He's been training me on defense and Defense."

"Oh! Are you our general-to-be?"

"He says it's an aptitude thing. They maybe want to spread what they know, like Dr. Chaney."

"Ri-i-i-ight. Not too strenuous I hope?"

"Not right now, no." Karen allowed herself a wry smile.

"And sleep. They let ya get any sleep up there?"

"In the early going it was hard, but Mo – Mary has eased up a lot. She's been great lately. Kind of scary."

"I can believe it. So, you're not holding back any horrors, baby too quiet, blood showing, any of that awful stuff?"

Karen's eyes widened.

Marcee suddenly seemed, if anything, even more grown up.

"Listen, babymaking is *serious shit*. This 'clinic' has damned few medicines, few instruments, no obstetricians, one pretend doctor, one old lady playing nurse, and one pretend intern, which is me. Have you noticed there are more men around the Creek than women?"

"Um. Yes."

"Have any of us told you why, yet?"

"I – I don't think so, no."

"Take a wild guess."

"We die in childbirth."

"We do indeed. So, now, I'm happy you're doing well right now. Listen, stay on the good water, don't drink from any of the creeks or the shallow wells – not even Hall water, unless it's been boiled for twenty minutes. Eat well, even if the people around you don't. I don't have to tell you folks are getting hungry. Demand more than your share, because both of you need it *now*. And pick somebody around you to come and study midwifery here."

"Why aren't you – oh."

"Oh. That's right. If we lose me, I'm not going to be much help to you, now am I?"

They sat together in silence for a moment. The air seemed to hang heavy and still between them.

"Do you get the feeling," asked Marcee suddenly, "as if some awful thing is about to happen?"

"What? What do you mean?" Karen placed her hand over her belly.

"Oh, not us ... you, or me. It's the air. Like it's listening and ... like it's sitting on all of us, and doesn't like to hear anybody breathing."

Karen shrugged with her one good shoulder. "I think I know what you mean. But I try not to borrow trouble. Oh!"

"What?" Marcee looked apprehensive.

"Kid's moving."

"Oh, hey, lemme feel."

Karen guided Marcee's hand.

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"She did pretty good," said Tom Chaney. "I don't like that about a premonition, though. Should stick to the patient's business and stay upbeat."

"Bosh," said Elsa. "I feel it, too."

"Feel *what*?"

"*It*. I don't know. The air, something."

Tom shook his head. "Women. So, you want to go to the festival, 'old lady'?"

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Marcee and Karen fell in behind the old-timers, but far enough back to confer privately.

Karen hitched up her belt again. The sunshine was painful on her hand, and she kept her head tilted forward so that the brim of her peasant hat shaded her eyes. The gravel of the path blazed; she was glad it was not far to Hall. "So, they did get hold of you. How did it go?"

"Oh, not bad. He thinks I should level with you less, she thinks more. They got in a funny little row, and turned me loose."

"What would be an example of 'more'?"

Marcee stopped, made sure Tom and Elsa had walked far enough ahead, and looked at her. "You can handle it, I guess. Well. We don't just die in childbirth, we, uhhh, there have been lots of kids that don't turn out, as well."

Karen held her belly again, and looked west, toward the opening of the hills toward the Big Valley. Out there, hidden now among its own trees and half buried by repeated floods, lay the Highway of Death. She realized she was not going to ask why she had not seen any of these children. But as to cause, she might ask. "Radiation?"

"Maybe. So many things went wrong, years before you and I were born. There could be stuff in the ground, in the water, or in our genes. Dr. Tom says that before the Undoing, they were putting plant stuff in animals and animal stuff in plants. Then there was biological warfare, there were bombs ... and Doctor Tom says that just the amount of stuff lying around, as it weathers, it changes the air, and the water, and

everything. Old 'landfills' falling apart, stuff like that."

"I read some of that; our books and stuff were from Before. And After is full of its leftovers. I guess we ... the baby and I ... don't have any guarantees. But I've never met anybody that does."

Marcee nodded; then she stopped and put her hand on Karen's arm. "Whoa. Look at that cloud."

Karen lifted her head so she could see from beneath the wide straw brim. To the southeast, over the shoulder of Starvation Ridge, a haze of cirrus had fanned out into the stark blue sky. Behind it a mass of cumulonimbus was building up to an impressive height, with pink folds and patches of somber gray.

"That's a storm from around Diamond or Thielsen," Karen, who knew her maps, said. "They spread north and then all over. We might have some rain by tomorrow."

"That would be a help," agreed Marcee.

They came to Hall gate, which was decorated with streamers of dyed cloth, in yellows and reds. The young women crossed the open ground and came into the shade, ten steps from the door. Activities had begun.

Several people were sitting by the main front door on a long bench made from heavy timbers. They were engaged in making music, with a guitar and wooden flute, and several were singing along. Marcee knew the song, and joined in as she walked up.

*Well, the summertime is coming,
And the trees are sweetly blooming;
And the wild mountain thyme
Blooms along the purple heather.
Will ye go, lassie, go?*

*And we'll all go together,
And pull wild mountain thyme
All along the blooming heather;
Will ye go, lassie, go?*

Karen, not being musical, passed on through the doorway and found some sixty people inside; half the Creek! She realized with a shock that though she'd been among them for almost a year, there were some she had not really met; even the General Meeting last winter had seemed to be composed of different faces than some that she saw, and then she realized that some of these were dressed differently than Creekers, and must be from Roundhouse. There must have been a general relaxing of the quarantine rules. She spotted Mrs. Ames, sitting at a table nearby, with Errol and the Perkins family, and elected to join them.

Mrs. Ames' shaking had increased noticeably, and her head was now permanently tilted to the right. But her smile was the same as ever. "Hel-lo, swee-sweetie," she said. Karen dumped her hat, cloak, and belt by the wall and dragged over a chair and sat down – surprisingly heavily – by Mrs. Ames and pressed her hand.

"So, what have I missed?" she asked.

Mrs. Perkins laughed. "Not much. It's been too hot in here, even with those going – " she indicated a small whirring fan, cannibalized from some ancient auto, among the rafters – "but they're setting up some kind of game in the middle of the room, and the young men are going to beat one another at it, then the women, is how I hear it."

"Not all together?" Karen glanced at the middle of the room, where tables had been cleared away, except for a big one she hadn't seen before. She recognized it immediately: ping-pong! Someone had held onto a ping-pong table, complete with paddles and balls, and it had either been stored here or brought from one of the farms for the occasion.

"No, It's guys then gals; Mr. Armon is our emcee today and that was what he decided."

Karen looked again at the group setting up the game. Armon, Bledsoe, bigger than most, was in charge, and he seemed almost cheery. She sighed and looked elsewhere. Things were busy around the kitchens. "I think I'll go see if I can help out in back," she said to them all, rising.

"Hungry?" smiled Errol. "I'll join you. That okay?" he asked the Perkinses.

"She's fine with us," replied Carl. "Aren't you, honey?"

Mrs. Ames smiled her crooked, kindly smile.

Karen and Errol crossed the room, steering clear of the goings-on in the middle, and made their way to the propped-open double doors. The smells enticed them in.

Guchi and several others, in new nettle-fiber aprons, were at the block table, chopping fruit.

"Need a hand?" asked Karen.

"Or three?" Errol held up both of his.

"Errol!" remonstrated Karen, in mock shock.

"No, actually," said Guchi, wiping his hands on a cloth that hung by the table's side. "We're just finishing the fruit salad, which is reconstituted dried apples, pears, and grapes, and the soup is a kind of gazpacho made mostly from dried zukes and cukes – all from last year. We did all the stove work last night, outside, and we'll serve everything 'cold.' You can help us bring it all out, though, after the tournament."

"Everything's from last year?" Karen looked at the relatively few pots and bowls on hand. So different from last fall!

"Well, except for some pemmican and jerky that was made this spring, and a dandelion-lamb's-quarters salad. Most of the jerky is from our guests."

"Roundhouse seems to be mostly hunter-gatherers," said Errol. "They drive deer with dogs. I've established some trade with them; they like our yew bows and we want puppies."

Karen put her fingers in the nearest large fruit bowl; Guchi made as if to slap at her hand, but grinned. "Who's getting puppies?"

"New Ames, Maggie's and Bledsoes', to start."

"Everything's about Bledsoes." Guchi shrugged.

"We're trying to help them feel they have a stake in the general welfare," said Errol.

Karen wolfed down the handful of fruit she'd purloined, and turned to face Errol. She was surprised to find he'd moved off to another table as he was speaking, and in his place there stood what appeared to be a gentle giant, holding an alderwood platter covered with strips of jerky. He looked past Karen to Guchi, and extended his hands with the platter as if asking a wordless question.

"Right here's fine," said Guchi. "Thanks."

The man complied, then turned toward Karen, who was still licking her fingers. "You are Karen." He spoke with a flat inflection, with the same stress on each word.

"Yes," she replied, looking up into his large, dark and childlike face, wonderingly.

He pointed to himself. "Bolo, Roundhouse."

Oh, of course! The 'simple' guy, who'd been staying at New Ames in her absence. "Karen, Ridge." *Maybe at Roundhouse, they keep the "different" children? Or is he a stray, like me?*

He didn't reply or smile, or mention he'd been occupying her room. Instead, after several seconds, he pointed to her left shoulder. "Hurts?"

"No, actually."

"Tips you over?"

"Umm, a little; I'm getting used to it, though."

"Yes. You lean into it. Baby pulls you forward. You pull back. Tired easy." He looked at a nearby empty chair, then back at her.

"Very observant and very kind. Thank you. But I was going back to the main hall." *Not so 'simple,'* thought Karen. *I like him.* "Join me?"

"Yes."

A game was in progress; doubles, with the Perkins boy and Raoul matched against Josep and one of his men. Only Dr. Tom had ever done this before, and he explained to them as they went along. The spectators were kept busy hunting down the ball, which got away from bad serves as well as missed hits. There was considerable laughter.

Karen sidled along the wall and took a seat near the stairwell to the

basement, and Bolo followed. They watched awhile in silence. Karen discovered Ellen Murchison, whose hair seemed to be getting whiter by the day, was sitting across the doorway from her, holding a walking cane. Both being recent widows, they had learned that a silence that had grown between them was something like companionship. They nodded to each other somberly.

The ball rolled over to them. Bolo leaned down and scooped it up; Josep came over for it and thanked him quietly. Karen could feel the young leader's affection for the giant, confirming her first impression.

At the main entrance, two wheelchairs rolled in, under their own power, followed by Wilson Wilson and Bobbo of Ridge. The game halted momentarily, and the musical contingent crowded the doorway behind the new arrivals. Armon, who'd been sitting near the ping-pong table kibitzing, stood up, a sneer breaking out on his features.

"Well, you made it after all. We were beginning to think th' show wasn't gonna be good enough for you cloud-dwellin' types."

Emilio jumped to his feet at the south end of the room. "It takes time to ride a bull-cart down that mountain and they had to wait for some of the heat to dissipate, as you surely know."

Savage Mary chuckled as she rolled forward. "Gently, Mr. Molinero. I like clouds a lot, and Mr. Armon is tall enough that he should like 'em, too." A ripple of weak laughter went round the room.

"Speaking of clouds," said Avery Murchison, "There's a hell of a storm brewing up. We might get a break in the drought tonight."

Farmers all, nearly everyone was cheered by the prospect. Karen noted that Armon seemed dissatisfied with the exchange, and that Ellen Murchison was frowning over something, though her attention was not on Armon. The game resumed.

'S'cuse me," Karen said to Mr. Bolo. "I'll be back."

"Mmh? Hmh." He sat, arms crossed, and returned his attention to the novel game.

Mrs. Murchison sat on a short bench; as Karen came over, she shifted to the right and made room.

"What's up?" asked the younger woman.

"You don't miss a thing, do you? I was remembering that storms are not all about rain. Who's on up at Ridge?"

"Millie, probably. Billee is on the circuit of the valleys and everyone else is putting in a politic appearance here."

Maggie, the fringes on her buckskin swaying, came over. Karen thought that Ellen, who had so recently been the tiger of the New Moon War, looked very diminished and frail next to her old associate. "Ellen, are you thinking what I'm thinking?" she fairly boomed.

"Yes, I expect. You two help me up, and I'll go downstairs and place a call to Millie."

"Do you want to confer with Avery first?" asked Karen.

Ellen hesitated. "No, he's got enough happening at the moment. I'll catch him up as soon as I get back. Keep me company?"

Karen followed Ellen to the darkened stairwell and they began to descend, feeling their way with their feet.

Two steps down, Ellen gasped and launched forward into the darkness.

"Ellen!" Karen followed, flailing for the handrail, then felt something across her shin and tipped outward in turn. She caught the handrail and slammed backward against the stairwell wall, part way down. Maggie's silhouette partially filled the doorway above.

"What happened?" she rasped.

"Ellen's fallen! Bring a light!" Karen ran down the remaining steps, holding the rail.

Maggie's shadow, ahead of Karen, disappeared, and Karen could see the still form of the elder sprawled before her, the cane underneath. Then another shadow took away her vision for a moment.

"What's this here?" It was Armon, Bledsoe.

"It's Ellen Murchison. She's down." Karen knelt beside her, feeling for an arm, a wrist, a pulse. But she was snatched to her feet.

"You little killer. You'll be hanged for this."

"What ... what? She might not be much hurt – let's check!"

His grip on her arm tightened. "Too late, I'm sure. You pushed her down!"

And he shook her.

Karen's mind went back to the Eastsiders who'd found her near the cabin in the mountains. The first one, who'd caught up to her in the knee-deep snow, had grabbed and shaken her. Both of the strange men, with their painted faces and knotted hair, their panting breaths frosting in the air, were burned into her memory forever.

If she had not had the little green pistol ...

"Let go my arm, Mr. Armon."

"Not effin' likely." He raised his other hand to strike.

Karen realized that she'd left her knife upstairs, and, besides, she had no other arm with which to draw one. It would have to be feet, then. She put her left foot behind her, to gain arc for the other, and planted her right boot in his crotch. The big man grunted with surprise. On the second kick, Karen could feel his grip loosen slightly. That would be enough. Dropping her weight momentarily, she twisted her arm toward his thumb, unlocking his grip. Armon recovered and grasped her hair with both hands, shoving her away, but it was too little, too late. Palm out, she found the base of his nose and struck twice, her muscles remembering to reach, not for the surface, but for arm's length. The big head snapped backward.

Karen's eyes by now had adjusted to the relative darkness, and she took advantage. Planting her feet, she made a fist, and struck for the

man's Adam's apple, connecting on the second try, and as he slipped to his knees, choking, straight-armed his nose again twice for good measure. Then she stepped back and assumed a stance from which she could aim a good flurry of kicks if need be.

More shadows appeared in the doorway, and then a light. Maggie, Bolo and others came down the stairs.

"What *is* this?" blared Maggie.

Karen found herself trembling all over. The baby squirmed like a fish inside. "Ellen's fallen down the steps. Get the doctor!"

A peal of thunder, long and low, growled over Hall.

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"K, everybody," said Tom sadly, "let's move out the tables and circle up; three rows deep should do it. Emilio, Carl, could we get the stage back where it was? Party's over for now, I think. An inquiry has been called by Maggie, and elders present concur."

"Kitchen, too?" asked Guchi from the doorway.

"Yes, please, everyone we can find. Someone bring in any outside stragglers within shouting distance, as well. Hit the Hall bell once on the way back in, thanks."

Mr. Molinero and Mr. Perkins, with the Molinero boys, seized the ping-pong table and slid it across to its place beneath the wall map of Starvation Creek. Others drew tables to the far walls and brought chairs. After much scraping, with a drone of hushed and astonished conversation, the room transformed itself into an oval of expectant faces, with the Council – down to Tom, Elsa, Maggie, and Mrs. Lazar, who had only just arrived, in the front row. With them, leaning on Juanita Molinero's arm, sat Mrs. Ames, as well as the two wheelriders Savage Mary and Avery Murchison, who sat in for his mother Ellen. A chair was placed in the center of the circle.

The great iron pipe that hung by the main door clanged once, loudly, and a faint echo returned from Ball Butte. Water began dripping from the eaves past the various windows. Latecomers in dripping cedar-fiber rain hats and cloaks came in. A heavy cloud cover had blanketed the valley, and there was relatively little light, except for flickerings from cloud-to-cloud lightning in the east. Lamps were brought in but not lit, reflecting the reluctance of all present to add to the stifling heat inside.

"Quorum?" asked Tom, addressing himself to Maggie.

"Quorum," she affirmed.

"Do we have a Recorder?" asked Tom. "I don't see Ro-eena."

"She's at Ridge, helping Millie. So that'll be me," answered Cal Perkins. "If we can get me any paper and a pencil."

"We will do that," said Guchi, who disappeared down the stairs.

Once the people were settled, the Council called for order – which was a formality, as the room had grown quite still, other than the waving of hand-fans.

"Bring forward the complainant, please," asked Tom.

Bobbo of Ridge stepped away from the wall, sword in hand, followed by Armon, still dabbing at his upper lip with a damp cloth. His nose was terribly swollen, and his eyes closed part way. He slumped into the chair.

"Water," he croaked.

This was brought to him by one of the Hall crew.

"For the record, name?" called out Dr. Chaney.

The big man's voice rasped. "Armon. Bledsoe!"

"Complaint?"

"Effin' girl jumped me."

"Narrative."

"I heard screams down the hole. Saw Maggie look in and run off. Threw down my paddle and went over to see what was the matter. Mrs. Murchison was down at the bottom and the kid was loomin' over her, gloatin'. I hauled her to her feet to ask her what the eff she'd done and she went crazy."

He pointed across to the wall, where Karen sat, with Bobbo standing by her shoulder. "She's a menace to the Creek! Gets people killed left and right."

"Observations?" This formal query Tom addressed to the Council.

"This is a little thin," offered Mary. "'Gloating' is an interpretation, and the last bit is a naked assertion. Has he got corroborating witnesses?"

"Have you?" asked Tom.

"You saw it!" Armon addressed this to Maggie.

"I'll speak in turn." Maggie, arms crossed, replied. "I do have an observation; this Council is loaded with people that are heavily involved with the respondent; shouldn't you recuse yourselves?"

"All right," Tom said. "Just for the record, yes, I, all other members of this Council, and about three-fourths of the Creek, are 'heavily involved' with the respondent, and the remaining fourth or so, including you, Maggie, are pretty heavily involved with Armon. I don't think we can pull a quorum of non-interested persons. I personally think all this will come out in the wash, so to speak, and that we will have to trust one another to mean well for the Creek as a whole in our conduct of this inquiry. Shall we put that to a vote of all hands?"

Maggie looked round the room challengingly. Many faces looked back in defiance. She harrumphed, and returned her attention to Tom. "We'll see how it goes, then."

"Thank you, Maggie; let's regard this inquiry as provisional, subject

to its being ratified as official by the GM – and there is sufficient membership present to call a GM on the spot."

"Sure," said Maggie.

"All right. Mr. Armon, thank you, why don't you go lie down somewhere over there and get some rest; I'll come give you a checkup as soon as I can. Respondent, please."

Bobbo turned to Karen, and nodded his head kindly. She barely noticed him, but rose at his touch and walked abstractedly to the chair that Armon had just vacated. She sat down heavily and regarded the Council with resigned detachment.

Tom marveled at the sight. The reserved young widow, too tall to be called "little," but slim – perhaps even slight, with her shock of hair standing at sixes and sevens, appeared wan and a bit withdrawn, but otherwise none the worse for wear. The bulge at her waist, apparent by now to everyone present, seemed incongruent with whatever had transpired. *And how many women on the Creek are expecting? Four, at most. What will there be left to quarrel over if that keeps up?*

Armon's pride had suffered a worse blow than his face; the respondent had taken down perhaps the largest, most physically fit man at the Creek after Wilson. 'Went crazy', indeed! Tom smiled inwardly.

"Name, for the record?"

"Karen, Ridge and New Ames." She hesitated. "May I ask a question?"

"Pertinent and procedural?" asked Maggie.

Lightning flashed at all the windows, silhouetting the crowd. Half the people in the room, unaccustomed to electrical storms, jumped.

"Pertinent, I hope." Karen drew a slow breath. "How is Mrs. Murchison?"

Maggie frowned, but Elsa leaned forward and caught Tom's eye. "I think she means that Ellen's testimony, if available, would be *very* pertinent."

An enormous thunderclap rolled over Hall.

"By all means, let's ask," responded Elsa's husband. "Guchi, could you pop down and query Marcee for us?"

"Yes, sir." The young man ran down the stairs again.

"While that's going forward, could we have the respondent's narrative?" asked Avery.

"Yes please. Karen?" offered Tom, with a gesture toward her.

"Mrs. Ellen seemed concerned about something of which the storm reminded her. She asked me to come with her to call Ridge about it. At the top of the stairs she suddenly pitched forward. I ran after her and something caught me across the ankle. I fell, too, but caught the hand rail and hit the wall." She raised her hand and felt her left side, which was beginning to stiffen. "Then I moved more cautiously and

went down to Mrs. Ellen, who was prone at the bottom of the steps, to look for vital signs. Mr. Armon came up behind me and – brought me to my feet – threatened me, and I asked him to let me go. He wouldn't, so I regained the free use of my arm and made sufficient space between us."

"By 'sufficient space' I assume you struck him," offered Maggie.

"Isn't that a leading question?" asked Elsa Chaney. "Wait, what was ..."

"No, that's fine," replied Karen. "I was taught that if a man laid hands on my person without permission, I was to cancel his action. I did do that, yes, ma'am."

A ripple of amusement ran round most of the circle, punctuated by more thunder.

Guchi appeared from the dark stairwell. "Sergeant Murchison's compliments to all at hand, and she wants to come up and testify. Marcee says she may, if we'll bring a stretcher and be, she says, 'damned careful.'"

"She shouldn't be moved!" asserted Maggie. "The doctor should assess her condition first."

"Ordinarily, I'd certainly agree," Tom answered. "But I did take a look a little while ago; Marcee has things well in hand and we have to begin trusting *Dr.* Marcee sometime. Anyway, if I know Ellen she'll just crawl up here if we say her nay. Avery?"

"You know my mom," said Avery, suppressing a smile. "Oo-rah, and all that."

A stretcher team formed, wrapping a woolen blanket round two poles.

Mary Savage tapped her knees with her thumbs, musing. "While we're waiting, Karen, what was that about storms?"

"She only said it was important to call Millie."

"Mmh. We might all be in for a rude awakening in a few days, Tom. Unless you have anything to add – excepting speculation, Karen, let's get Maggie's deposition. They're gonna be slow getting Ellen in here if they have any sense."

"I should stand down?" asked Karen, tentatively.

"Yes, thank you, Karen. If you'll go back over and sit by Mr. Bobbo."

As soon as Karen vacated, Maggie stood up and strode to the chair.

"Mr. Perkins, how is it going?" asked Tom.

Cal's pen hovered in the air. "Good, so far, sir; if everyone will slow down a bit, even better."

"I'm sure it will do. Maggie Andrews, what can you tell us?"

"Ahem. After the tumbling and shrieking were over, I entered the stairwell and inquired as to what had gone forward. The young woman – "

"Karen?"

" – the same – informed me Ellen had sustained a fall and asked for the doctor. I came looking for you or your protégé, got Marcee and a candle, and returned. Mr. Armon was sitting on the bottom step, gargling and spluttering, and the little hellcat was making absurd karate postures in front of him. Armon communicated to me that she should be taken into custody, which I asked Mr. Bobbo to do, and looked to Mrs. Murchison with Marcee. She was breathing fairly regularly, so I left them and came upstairs, bringing Mr. Armon with me."

"Observations?" asked Tom, looking to his left.

Mary rolled her eyes in spite of herself. "That seems straightforward, though we might find 'hellcat' and 'absurd' interpretive and extraneous to the narrative."

"Agreed," put in Avery.

More lightning flashes strobed at the windows.

"Rude, I should say," said old Mrs. Lazar.

Everyone turned to her in mild surprise; she was someone who had seldom entered into public discussion, especially since her losses in the New Moon War.

"Too much, excuse me, crap, in the narratives. They give us bupkes – excepting her." She pointed to Karen. "Very interested I'll be to hear Ellen's bit."

As thunder grumbled along the room, Marcee came in from below, carrying herself mindfully up the stairs, and sat near Karen. The stretcher bearers followed, making their way gently through the doorway of the basement stairwell and into the middle of the circle. Maggie, without waiting to see if Council regarded her testimony as complete, rose from the chair and lent a hand as the young men lowered Ellen Murchison to the floor. A rolled and folded towel on each side of her neck served as a brace.

"I know everybody but me thinks it's hot in here; but have you got a blanket?" she asked a bearer.

"Sure thing, ma'am, we'll get you one."

"Ellen, are you being foolish?" asked Maggie, in genuine concern for an old friend.

"Why, no, Maggie, are you?" was Ellen's rejoinder. "Go sit down; you're making me nervous."

Avery grinned in relief.

"Am I on?" asked Ellen, rolling her eyes round toward the Council seats.

"Yes, Murchie," answered Tom. "We've heard from everyone else. But we're, anyway, I'm concerned about the way we're tossing you around."

"Bosh, Doctor, I'm not broken – I don't *think*. Even little Marcee

doesn't; it's precautionary. Can everybody hear me?"

Emilio stood and rotated, looking the crowded circle in their faces. "Back rows; stand up if you can't hear, please." There followed a rustling of sliders on the fir flooring.

"Thank you, young man. So. I start downstairs with my walking stick and with Karen for support; should have waited to get a lamp but I'm too impatient. I hit a tripwire. That's all I remember."

The collective gasp filled the long Hall.

"A tripwire?" Tom frowned. "Why would there be a tripwire at Hall? Why the stairwell, with over a hundred people going back and forth?"

"I'm sure you're not asking me for *interpretation*, Tom."

Tom swung around. "Cal, did Karen testify to a tripwire?"

Mr. Perkins paged back through the old ring binder. "Umm-m-m-m. Oh. I ran after her and something caught me across the ankle."

"Damn. Why didn't we pick up on that?"

"I did," murmured Elsa. "But then we went off on a tangent."

"Well, if there was a wire," asked Maggie, "Where is it now?"

"Right here, maybe," said a voice. Everyone turned to see who had spoken. Josep, the young man from Roundhouse, stood up near the main door, with something in his hand. He made his way forward.

"There's getting to be little light here," put in Cal. "Can we get some lamps going?"

Lights were brought. The object in Josep's possession was offered for the Council's inspection under several of them.

Mary spoke first. "This here's fourteen-gauge single-strand copper, in black insulation. Probably stripped out of some old household Romex."

"Whatever that is," said Tom. "Presumably good for tripping, if that's what it was used for. About four feet long. And this came into your possession how?" he asked Josep.

"Bolo handed it to me; said it was dangling down the top step from a *hook* in the wall. There was another hook in the other wall, too, he told me; but there were only the two little holes when I went to look."

"Jeah help us," said Elsa quietly.

"Where's Mr. Bolo?" asked Tom.

"Here." The big man, who'd been sitting near Karen and Marcee, stood up and held his arm high above his head, palm out; a strangely formal gesture unknown along the Creek.

"You found this as Mr. Josep has described?"

"Yes."

"And there were hooks, and they are not there now?"

Bolo knitted up his eyebrows, then craned sideways and looked at the stairwell wall, not ten feet from where he stood. Straightening up, he faced Tom again. "They are not there now."

"And you did not take them? I'm sorry, we have to ask."

"I do not mind. I did not take the hooks. The black thing looked very strange to me. I took it to show to Josep."

A brilliant flash of light strobed in at the west windows, followed almost immediately by a series of rumbles and thumps that seemed to go on for a long time. The noise of rain on the long roof above, which everyone had been hearing without noticing it, began to slacken.

Maggie opened and closed her mouth. Then she stood up. "Where's Armon?"

"Back here." He sat up on the table on which he'd been lying, and wrapped his big hands around his knees. Everyone swiveled around in their seats to face him. "What? Look at all of ya glarin'. No, *I* didn't set any trap, and if anyone did, they didn't bother to tell *me* about it."

Tom stood up. "Since we're all here: anyone see *anything* that might have any bearing on this?"

None one moved or spoke.

Emilio rose from his chair again. "Creekers, we have a troubling thing here. There has never been such among us in my memory. Please speak, if you have seen this."

Heads turned, as people looked in one another's faces. Hand fans fanned.

Ellen spoke up from beneath her blanket on the floor. "Dear ones all, or I suppose *almost* all. Consider: without what used to be called 'modern' forensics, it could take us a long time to make sense of it. *Anyone* could have done this. Even me; *I* could theoretically have set the wire and then forgotten about it – all I have in my favor is the unlikelihood. We might all have our own ideas about whom, and who they were targeting, what their motivation could be. If we think too much about it, it will tear us all apart, and that couldn't, very likely, come at a worse time. Maggie, tell 'em about lightning storms in a drought."

Maggie spread her arms dramatically, hands outspread. "*Fire*. Lots of it."

"Of course. Forest fire," added Savage Mary. "Whole mountains, hole *valleys* burning. Don't know how we've skipped it this long. Maggie, with no witness to a trap setter coming forward, we may have to close your inquiry temporarily and talk fire. That good with everyone?"

Maggie spread her hands wider, turning the dramatic gesture into an almost comical shrug. It meant, *Do we have a choice?* She turned to the figure on the floor.

"Ellen, did you get to place your call?"

"Marcee did it for me. Millie and Ro-eena are already mapping lightning strikes."

...

"So, Karen; am I *little*?" Marcee looked down at herself.

Karen smiled wanly. "Not a bit of it."

They sat together in silence. Much was going on around them, but there seemed to be no place for them, at the moment, in the urgent discussions going forward.

"Marcee?"

"Mm-hmm?"

"Surely not everyone has always been perfect on the Creek. What's the penalty – say, for murder, or – or rape?"

"Well, there were banishments. Before my time. Pilgrims that didn't work out were provisioned and escorted to the Bridge. But lately, I've heard that's not a good idea, because they might turn the Creek in to some bandit leader somewhere... Lockdowns. But those were for thefts, or refusing to carry out a voted task."

"Has there ever been talk of *hanging* here?"

Marcee's eyes widened. "Jeeah, no! Why do you ask?"

"Not sure. Yet." Karen watched the room as she spoke.

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After the lightning strike, slabs of steaming Douglas-fir bark had flown lazily outward in three directions, caroming off fir and hemlock branches and sliding downward to the forest floor. The stricken tree, thirty-seven meters in height, had swayed and shuddered for a bit before regaining its equilibrium. Two days had passed.

White streaks of cambium gleamed in the cracks where the plasma had run along the tree trunk, and sap had already begun to ooze. At one point, twenty-four meters above the slope below, an unusually large branch had grown at right angles to the tree trunk, before reaching to the sky, and one of the streaks had abruptly ended here, resurfacing beneath the branch. In the crotch of the branch, fir needles and bark dust had accumulated for more than a century. Over the years, enough moisture had found its way into the duff to support a few lichens, mosses, and one maidenhair fern, but in the current drought the pocket had dried out completely, and the fern sat patiently waiting for a rainy day, its fronds curling in upon themselves.

There had been a little rain, just enough to dampen the upper canopy, but none of it had reached into the bone-dry shadows. A wisp of smoke curled up from the duff pocket and dissipated to eastward.

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Forty-three kilometers to the west, Savage Mary rolled forward in the already hot shade of Hall's west wall. The spot had been chosen for its relatively safe location, well away from the surrounding tinder-dry

foliage. The ground had been sprinkled with watering cans as a precaution, and full cans stood by in case of need.

Mary looked over the setup and showed her best crooked smile. "Nice job, guy," she said to Deela.

"Why, thank you, ma'am." The young man dropped his gaze in momentary confusion, then stood back, but near enough to make himself useful.

"All right, gather round, kiddos." Mary gestured toward the multiply-hinged steel-topped table that had been set up. "This here's what used to be known as a 'fire table.' We've got a sackful of dead fir needles dumped here and spread thin, and that represents fuel, which is what it is. Think 'forest', 'kay?"

Heads nodded earnestly.

"So, for our purposes, a fire needs three things, fuel, heat, air – specifically oxygen, as a rule, which is some stuff that's in the air. Plenty of oxygen in the air above the table and mixed in with the fir needles. Some's trapped in the needles themselves. Plenty of fuel here in th' needles – mainly carbon. Combines pretty easily with the oxygen if heat in the vicinity flashes beyond about two hundred thirty degrees Celsius. Got that candle?"

A girl stepped forward, her hand cupped around the flame.

"And who are you, dear?" asked Dr. Mary.

"Ceel Perkins – Tomlinsons'."

"Pleased to meet ya. So, do you want to light the forest fire, or shall I?"

"I'll do it, ma'am."

"Cool. So pinch up a little bit of 'fuel' out in th' middle of this section, here, and touch it off for us."

Ceel did so and then stepped back. A black circle formed on the table, less than two inches across, and then grew slowly, leaving a graying center. Above it, a blueish column of vapor and smoke, barely visible in the morning light, rose vertically, with a pale, almost invisible flame at its base.

"Now, kids, what you got here," crowed Mary, with an imperious gesture, "is a smallish forest fire. They all start small. *Really* small. Right now you could smack this one out with the palm of your hand."

The black ring inched outward.

"On a flat, without wind, a fire grows incrementally and concentrically." She looked up. *Hmm. Too many blank faces.* "Y'all can interrupt when I run off into twenty-Amero words. 'Kay, it grows slow and it grows on all fronts th'same. See, there's no heat 'cept close to th' flame, so nothin' burns except as it gets hot enough, 'cuz it's close enough. Deela, y'wanna switch on that little fan, there?"

Deela came forward and twisted a pair of wire ends together. The tiny blower at the end of the table, cannibalized from some old

refrigeration unit, buzzed into life. The black ring changed into an oblong shape and picked up speed, growing toward the other end of the table.

Mary picked up the long willow twig that lay across the armrests of her wheelchair. She pointed. "Your heat and oxygen travel with wind, and they pick up th' fuel as they go. So *always* know where th' wind is. You're downwind from a forest fire, it will come after you, *faster than you can run*. So go *sideways* along th' fire front. If you can't beat it around th' corner, run *through* it – if you *can*. Fuel's already expended in here." She tapped the gray ashes. "Fan off. Now, let's have a little 'fire on th' mountain'. About a thirty-degree slope, please."

Deela reached underneath the table and lifted the second and third sections. The table legs dragged inwards.

"See, th' fire wants to keep running thataways even without th' fan. It runs uphill because th' heat is driving up through th' fuel from underneath, and pulling in th' oxygen behind it. A big enough fire, or any fire on a slope, makes its *own* wind."

The young man leaned forward and swept the fir needles off the raised hinge with his thumb. The black line reached the top of the slope, and, finding no fuel there, left off traveling in that direction, growing instead to left and right along the edge and the entire slope.

Mary nodded. "It's more complicated in the hills. You can line around a fire if there's no wind, but a big fire, a hill fire, or especially a big hill fire, *always* has wind. And we're all hills here, so all wind all th' time. On a ridge top sometimes your Jeeah – " she looked over at the small contingent from Roundhouse – "or your Jesus – will favor you, but th' trees are *taller* than these here fir needles. Fire gets in the upper branches, it throws itself around. Sparks cross your line and make spot fires on the other slope. Now you're trapped. Ceel honey, let's light th' other side here, right in th' middle."

Ceel brought the candle again.

"See, it comes up to th' line *fast*. Faster than th' big fire did. It's pulled toward the crest by th' wind from th' other side. So you're toast. If you *do* find yourself in this fix don't run uphill – it'll *getcha*. Roast your lungs before you even get burned. Run sidehill or, last resort, run right down through it and hold yer breath. But you c'n *use* this scenario; if we burn up this side of th' hill *ourselves*, from below, there's no fuel for th' *big* fire when it gets here. S'called a *backfire*."

Mary looked around at the sober faces that surrounded her.

"Back in 'th' day, folks fought these things with airplanes that dumped a fire-fighting powder on the flames, or they shot water out of hoses from tank trucks – bigger than th' few garden hoses we have left here; they cut down trees an' brush with chain saws an' backfired 'em wi' drip torches, 'n pushed fire lines with bulldozers. But they always tried to find an' hit th' fires when they were *little*, to save all that

trouble. They'd parachute out of airplanes or rappel down from helicopters to find a little fire no bigger than this one an' put it out with a couple shovelfuls of dirt."

A palm raised. "'parachute?'"

"Oh, kind of a big umbrella thing; you float down out of th' sky slow enough to usually not break a leg."

Incredulous expressions all round.

"Oh, c'mon, kids, have I ever lied to you? Not often, anyways. Y'ever blow dandelion seeds?"

Nods.

"Same thing. Now, y'see th' fire's still growing on all its edges except downslope on our side of th' mountain. Nothing's gonna stop it till it's out of one of its three requirements. With what we can do nowadays, we're pretty much out of it as fire fighters. This thing can get air all it wants. It has plenty of heat. It still has fuel. It's gonna burn till it rains, basically. Rain, please."

Deela brought over a watering can and doused the table, sending up a hissing cloud of steam.

"Questions?"

One of the men from Roundhouse, the young leader, stepped forward.

"Could you, we, umm, use a bulldozer?"

"We got ten or twelve bulldozers, sonny, 'an they'll sit till doomsday without oil."

"Well – umm, this one's a little, a gasoline model. We, uhh, we do use it."

"What, tweaked for alky? You got *that* much?"

"No, wood smoke."

"I'll be damned. I've heard of that, but nobody on th' Creek remembered how! So ... when were ya gonna tell us about this prized possession?"

"Well ... kind of a state secret. But it seems like the thing to talk about, after that ... dreadful storm."

"Sure, so ... ain't ya gonna need it up there?"

"We've used it for years, kind of sparingly, clearing ground around the Roundhouse, primarily for defense – field of view. That's all done. We tried plowing with it, but irrigation and weeds have been big issues afterwards. So right now it's mostly sitting, like yours. And Roundhouse is pretty fireproof."

"Say fire comes, eats up your whole valley, what then?"

He grinned. "Then we'd starve, likely. What else is new?"

"Same here, sonny, we'd all hide in 'th Ridge an' then come out after th' cataclysm and watch a few sunsets till th' goodies run out. We want to keep these fields intact if we can."

"So, maybe, we should bring our little 'cat' over here and cut a line

around your valley?"

"I don't think we need a Council vote on that! Yes, *please*. How long do you think it would take to get here?"

"I leave right now, a day to get there, maybe half a day to mechanic, rig up and supply, two, two-and-a-half days' return. Deerie would have to cut her own trail to get to you; two mountains and a valley full of second growth."

"Deary'?" Mary raised her eyebrows.

"One of the old-timers could read. She said it said 'deer' on the side of the engine cover, so we called her 'Deerie.'"

"Cute. A John Deere crawler! Didn't know they made 'em! So, 'Deerie' has a blade, then? ... that *works*?"

"Hydraulics are long gone, but we use a come-along to raise it. Slow, but there it is. Oh, and a cage and drawbar, no winch."

"Oh-em-gee, you kids are the mannah – how long, do you think, would it take to cut a fire trail around these farms? Assuming *no* mechanical breakdowns?"

Josep's grin faded. He looked around at Ball Butte, Maggie's Hill, and the distant Cascades. "About a week, ma'am."

"Well I guess we'd better send you packin' right now!"

Mary rolled away toward hall with the Roundhousemen in tow. Class was evidently dismissed.

Ceel blew out her candle and tugged at Deela's sleeve. "Machinery is female?" she asked.

He shrugged. "It's – kind of a Before thing."

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Ellen Murchison hobbled up the path, with her hazel walking stick, to the compost windrows. There were now an even dozen of these, five feet high and a hundred feet long, in the remaining flat ground between Hall Farm and the looming bulk of Starvation Ridge. She passed an idled bullock cart and found a bit of shade just beyond the end of the freshest pile. Somewhere in that end, she knew, were the remains of her husband, making his final contribution to the health and welfare of the Creek. She eased herself painfully down onto a maple stump and rested her chin on the head of her stick, peering out at the dazzling sunlight from beneath the wide brim of her peasant hat.

"Hey, Murch." They had called each other that. She could easily imagine she heard the bones' reply.

Hey, Murch. What's up?

"Ahhhh, all hell. Kids are trying to kill each other on the sly, and clean out us old timers too, I think. I smell 'regime change.' Maggie's close to it somehow, Jeeah knows why. And then, there's other stuff."

What's that?

"Well, the young folks at Ridge and Ball Butte have triangulated a good forty smokes out there. Some parties are going after the close ones with axes, shovels, and rakes, but I think we're gonna finally have the big one before it's over. The highs have been over a hundred ever since the full moon, that's nine days in a row."

Go to Ridge. What it's for.

"Well, sure. But after that, what will they all do? Hell, *I'm dying now*, Murch, I can feel it, somewhere down around my plumbing, same as you. I'll probably have to check out, same way you did, you brave and good man, you."

Coward's way.

"Not any more, it's not. That's Before talking. They gave us the 'big green weenie,' but you, the day you thought you couldn't contribute any more, you asked me to bring you that teenager's little gun. I knew damn well what you wanted it for, and I brought it, didn't I?"

Love.

"Yes, it was, damn you, Murch. I did that for you, and I guess I hope any one here would do that for me. So what do we do if the Valley burns?"

Rebuild.

"How? – with what? We're little more than a hundred now, able-bodied that is, and all the building materials are in harm's way."

Stay at Ridge. Crops close to the Creek, water in ditches. Long poles.

"Shadoof. I remember now, I've seen those. We covered a lot of ground, you and me."

Yes.

"It might not work. They're getting dispirited."

'JJ did tie buckle'.

"I had almost forgotten that one. Let's see: Justice, Judgment. Dependability, Initiative, Decisiveness. Tact, Integrity, Enthusiasm. Bearing, Unselfishness, Courage, Knowledge, Loyalty, Endurance."

That's all there is. Teach it, over and over.

"And then?"

Nobody lives forever.

"You and your 'Air Force salute.' Easy for *you* to say, I might point out."

A faint sound reached Ellen in her reverie. She raised her head and squinted toward Hall from beneath the hat brim. Someone, hatted and caped, was trudging through the heat toward her. From the slightly lopsided gait, it must be Karen of New Ames. She was carrying her gun belt in her hand; it swung against the cape from inside.

"Here comes your protégé."

She received, but had expected, no reply; the whole conversation had been in her own head, she knew. Conversing with a hollow place

in her heart.

"Hey, girl."

"Ma'am."

"Gotcha belt with you."

"I feel a need to go armed. But I'm getting too big around for the belt."

"We'll make you an ALICE."

"What's that?"

"Well, now; they didn't have those any more, not even in my day, but it's an easily made load-bearing getup; suspenders combined with a belt, basically. In fact, everyone should probably have one, now that you're re-arming us with all the little pea-shooters. Might be good for firefighters, too, come to think of it. Best way to carry drinking water if you don't have 'camelbaks'. Those floppy belts that are all the rage don't quite cut it, to my mind. Ask Avery."

"I will. Thank you."

"Sit?"

"Thank you."

"You're too polite. What's on the belt, anyway?"

Karen brought it out and rested it on her knees. "Twenty-two revolver, High Standard, six inch. Right-hand thumb-break holster, cross draw. 'Magnum' double-edged knife, sheath, right hand side. 'USFS' water bottle, canteen cover, hip. Auxiliary pouch, hip, fifty rounds black powder twenty two, wrapped." She recited this like a lesson.

"You sound just like Avery."

"I'm studying with Mr. Wilson at the moment."

"Of course. Nine rounds?"

"Yes."

"How's reliability now?"

"I would expect seven of them to work. Not much oomph and messy to clean up after, but good to go."

"'Good enough for government work.' We're proud of you, Karen, this was what we needed."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Looking at centerfire yet? I'd love to see reliable rounds for our Pee-Nineties and Five-Sevens."

"What are those?"

"Avery hasn't shown them to you? There's a little armory at Ridge."

"I've seen it; but I didn't know what those were called."

"We were equipped with the little bullpups and matching pistols in our guard service. Old designs but handy. Lasers, low recoil, and some armor penetration."

"Umm, no, ma'am, I haven't seen those rounds yet. Shotgun shells are next."

"Well, Jeeah knows there are plenty of shotguns lying around. Every farmhouse, it seemed, had them."

"Yes."

"So, what made you look for me here?"

The young woman looked at her steadily.

"Well, we ... we weren't much, compared to you two, but ... my guy is here too, you know."

"Oh – oh-em-gee, Karen, I'm *so* self-centered. Please forgive me. Of course he is. They're both right over there."

"Yes, ma'am. Side by side."

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The young man, comfortable in his newly issued (though very used) camo fatigues and slouch hat, raised his hand in almost affectionate salute. "Good morning, my lord."

"Good morning, Lockerby, it's good to have you back."

Magee, in his customary white shirt and suspenders, looked even older than Lockerby remembered – but spry. Behind those thick glasses, he knew, the old man had never missed much. "Thank you, my lord."

Magee looked over the young man's shoulder. "A lovely caravan; shall we inspect?"

"Yes, sir."

Lockerby, who had been prisoner number 28212 in this very facility, had spent the last two years, very much against his will, soldiering for a militia in the Sacramento Valley. They had, like Wolf's army, bitten off more than they could chew – trying to establish a feudal empire in the presence of too much background radiation and insufficient agriculture. His escape and long journey back to Roseburg evinced qualities Magee sought to cultivate: perseverance, endurance, initiative. These, rightly cultivated, would be of use to the Volunteers. The young man had been an asset to Magee's Klux army in times otherwise best forgotten. *But what of obedience? That one is difficult; it vanishes in a moment.*

"Mullins has done a good job here, sir. In the lead we have a Caterpillar D-8 with armored cage and gun ports. It only seats two, driver and shotgun, but it's covered by the LAV-35, which will follow. The LAV, like all the rigs, has poor electronics and no machine gun ammunition, but the turret does traverse and the thirty-five millimeter HESH-T rounds are functional. We've improvised a scope for aiming, and while traveling in the woodlands, the gun, if needed, will operate on line-of sight, sighted in for one hundred meters. When we want, we can go over three thousand meters. Not very accurately, but it should do."

"How many rounds?"

"Four hundred and another two hundred in one of the trucks. Half of everything that we found in the bunker, and most of the rest is really training rounds anyway."

"Who will cover the LAV?"

"Mounted tribals from Eastside have undertaken to travel on both sides of the column, prepared to engage anyone approaching the vehicles, especially this one, and will carry out patrols on the flanks."

"Mnmh. And who's keeping an eye on *them*?"

"Who, indeed?" asked a voice behind them. They turned to see a tall, bearded man, dressed in a loincloth with a long knife sheath, empty, on its belt. His hair was black, streaked with gray, parted in the middle and braided with red yarn, falling halfway to his waist from behind each ear. His feet stood, laced with leather thongs, upon rubber-tire sandals. Muscular and tanned, he had about him the gait and bearing of a competent and habitual horseman. Around his neck hung a simple leather thong strung with lion's claws. These were so fresh that the already-hot morning air wafted a hint of recent death to the Volunteers' noses. Magee focused on the claws.

"Have you been messin' around with our lions, Mr. Lacey? We *did* ask you to avoid them."

Lacey almost smiled. "Did you ask *them* to avoid *us*? The horses were of great interest to them; this one visited our encampment and was reluctant to give up our company."

"So I see. Well, Mr. Lacey, as you appear to have joined our tour – Mr. Lockerby?"

"My lord Magee. Behind the LAV you see the four MRAPs, in effect a supply train of armored trucks, and each will have a driver and a guard. These will carry the best of our functional small arms – the AK and the shotguns – and will watch all proceedings with the understanding that no one is to approach the LAV or other vehicles. The free-fire zone will be fifty yards, and strictly enforced. The motorized column will make road as they go, using the Cat to clear a single swath along the old freeway. The balance of the Volunteers, with their packs, will march in the rear, also keeping a distance of fifty yards. There are enough drums of diesel, MREs and other provisions to get everyone to the ghost town on the North-Running River and establish winter quarters, after which the MRAPs will return along the new road and resupply. Scouting indicates there will be sufficient forage and water along the way for horses, though conditions are becoming very dry."

"The Northern Detachment, shall we say? Thank you." Magee half turned toward his guest. "Mr. Lacey, we have gathered and trained here some three hundred men for the pacification of the Great Valley, beginning with this little push. But only about sixty will leave this departure point tomorrow; we can't easily maintain supply for more,

even with th' new road. Your contingent will be *extremely* valuable in coverin' the flanks and th' line of supply, as well as reconnoiterin' ahead. So you know our *modus operandi* and disposition in sufficient detail, I trust; and perhaps you will do us th' favor of outlinin' yours."

"There is nothing simpler; of my people, who now cover much of the inland area in small bands, we have come to you twenty-four in number, with forty-six horses, under my command. The spare horses carry jerky and pemmican, plentiful and well secured. We all carry good bows and we have good eyes and can provision ourselves along the line of march, to save on our supplies and, if necessary, yours."

"And with the understandin' that Mr. Mullins commands the expedition, and Mr. Lockerby, here, succeeds him in the event of anythin' untoward?"

"We will follow Mr. Mullins' direction, as he seems capable and straightforward; reserving the right to notify him that we must act in our own self-interest if conditions warrant."

Magee turned to Lockerby. "You see how it is, Lockie; no more can anyone ask of an ally. The East is vast, and there will be no leveragin' folks. So our friend and I must be polite and formal with each other, and you must do th' same." He returned his attention to Lacey. "So where's your horse, buddy?"

Lacey indicated with his eyes the corner of the nearest barracks, and whistled between his teeth. A younger man appeared round the corner, also wearing breech cloth and braids, leading two horses with deerhide bridles and saddle blankets. They were fine-looking horses, with equal portions of Quarter horse and of Appaloosa in their appearance.

Magee returned his gaze to the chieftain. "We will see to their needs. Tell me, did ya come in by th' east gate or th' south one?"

"South; we spoke to the man on duty there and told him we were coming to a meeting with you. We left our weapons with him, of course."

"Of course. Well I am about to go to th' refectory for lunch with th' Doctor and you are invited. Oh, Lockie, thank you for the tour."

"You are welcome, my lord."

The chieftain inclined his head slightly and departed to confer with his horseman. Magee, who had made as if to step to the shaded entryway of the building, waited till Lacey was out of earshot, and retraced his steps.

"Lockie, that son-of-a-bitch has been allowed to walk *right up on me*. Go up to th' south gate and make things right, wouldya?"

"My lord. With pleasure."

The sun beat down unmercifully on the cracked pavement of the prison courtyard. All the blue-bellied fence lizards, which had come out to hunt bugs in the long shadows of early morning, had

disappeared. Lockerby chose his route so as to avoid being seen by the visitors. Two left turns brought him to a direct path to the south gate, several blocks away.

"Lockie." Mullins appeared from Lockerby's left, out of the shade of cell block B, and fell in with him.

"Mullins, sir."

"Huh. Not used to being 'sirred' by you yet."

"Sir, it's how it would be if I'd stayed all along and you'd just shown up."

"That's so. On a mission?"

"Yes, sir; I've been asked to investigate a security breakdown and take corrective action."

"Oh, ho! I saw that cowboy with th' old man; he did seem to have got here a little early. Join you?"

"Yes, sir, please do. Shouldn't take too long."

They stepped into the narrow shade of Cell Block C and walked single file to the Gate stairway. The railings were hot to the touch, and the air above the steel stair treads shimmered. Lockerby led Mullins to the second level, which was a steel-walled tower, designed in a bygone era to keep prisoners in and the inquisitive out. The view in all directions was impressive.

The guard, an olive-complexioned youth of about fifteen, stood gazing out on the brown landscape beyond the Gate. Beside him, leaning against the wall, was his crossbow; two Eastern style bows, with decorated deerskin quivers, and two Bowie knives lay on the floor next to it. The guard turned as they came in, saw who they were, and stood to attention. "Sirs."

"At ease," said Lockerby. "Simmee, we got a couple of visitors through here?"

"Sir, yes, sir, the Injun chief and one of his men; Lord Magee was expectin' 'em."

"Indian?" asked Mullins.

"Ain't that what they are?"

"Well, no, or not entirely, but that's immaterial right now," said Lockerby. He stepped a bit closer to Simmee, while Mullins hopped on the table that occupied the center of the room and nonchalantly swung his legs.

"What are the standing orders from Magee, can you tell me?" asked Lockerby.

Fully alert now, Simmee looked as if he wanted to back away from Lockerby, but knew better than to try. "Sir, to challenge and turn away all comers unless instructed otherwise, and to disarm those excepted."

"I may have missed something there. Did you not send for an escort for th' tribesmen?"

"Sir? They were expected, and are our allies, sir?"

"Expected in the *afternoon*. They got here in the middle of the morning, looks like. I believe your relief was to be a three man team, for the express purpose of providing the escort. These two were, for purposes of *your* watch, not excepted, let alone authorized to poke about all on their lonesome."

"I – I must have misunderstood, when we got our orders for the day at barracks, sir."

"I think you must have, Simmie." Lockerby turned up his left palm and studied it disinterestedly.

Mullins drew a quick wavy line in the air with his finger, drawing the guard's eye for a moment. Lockerby slipped an ice pick from his sleeve and, with one unhurried, fluid movement, buried it to the handle between the ribs over the youth's heart.

Simmie stood transfixed for a couple of seconds, as if still trying to make sense of Mullins' gesture, then slumped abruptly to the floor, where he flopped about uncontrollably for a few seconds more, then grew still. A flatulent odor began to permeate the hot tower. Lockerby had retained the ice pick, and had stepped back briefly to avoid the flailing legs. He came forward again and wiped the point of the pick clean on the body's sleeve. A sigh escaped the corpse.

"Sad," said Mullins.

"Yes," said Lockerby. "If it had been either one of *us*, we could have assigned him some double shifts, run him around the campus for a few hundred laps, and then re-trained him. But we can't have 'em that sloppy about the Boss, not even once."

"Shall we carry him downstairs?"

"Let's," agreed Lockerby, slipping the ice pick into its hidden sheath. "It's cooler under the stairs, and that'll bring less trouble to the kitchen crew."

Mullins slid off the table and stood by the feet. Lockerby started to lean over to grab the shoulders, but halted as he saw Mullins' expression change. Mullins was looking into the distance past Lockerby's head. "What's up, sir?"

"Helluva cloud over there. Hilltop's signaling about it, too, seems like."

Lockerby turned and looked toward the ridge. A figure, tiny at such distance, stood by the stone outpost at the top, waving a flag on a long pole. Behind him a massive bank of smoke was blotting the northern sky, larger at the top than underneath, vaguely reminding Lockerby of a mushroom. "Whoa. Forest fire?"

"I think. It's not clouds, there's at least three colors. Might have something to do with the storm that was over that way yesterday."

"Yah, that was horizon-to-horizon stuff, though we didn't get a drop. Wonder if it will affect our mission ... "

"*Looks* big. Who can tell?"

"Well ... got a mission right here, meanwhile. Need to go find a replacement guard, too."

"Yeah. Lemme get his feet."

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"Hello, my dear."

"My lord! You've brought company! I'll ask for another place setting."

"Don't get up, I've already made the request. Introductions! Mr. Lacey. The Doctor."

"How do you do," murmured the Doctor.

"Ma'am. That is your name – the Doctor?"

"It will do. Didn't I see another young man through the window? We could set another place."

"You are kind, ma'am, but it would not be good discipline. He is a slave."

"Oh! Of course."

Magee drew his cup to him and reached for the creamer. "Coffee? Yer slaves go armed, then?" Magee squinted through his glasses at Lacey's silhouette; even through tinted glass the sunlight was very strong.

"Trust is the basis of any relationship. Do not your soldiers carry arms, and do they not obey you?"

"A soldier and a slave have much in common," smiled the Doctor.

"That case could be made," acceded the chieftain, "But with us there are two kinds of men – the warriors and the bringers of food. On such a journey as this, a trusted slave may accompany each warrior, and bring him food, but also defend him." Lacey stared at the cup from which he'd just sipped. "What is this ... 'coffee'?"

"Grows on you," said Magee. "What happens if you run out of food?"

"Then he brings me ... himself."

"Hard-core. I think I like that. He wouldn't resist the idea?"

"He has a family."

"Ah. We're more alike than I maybe thought, Mr. Lacey."

"Some broiled kudu?" asked the Doctor.

"Thank you, ma'am. You are curious, perhaps, as to why we are here."

Chewing, Magee looked up from his plate at Lacey and swallowed. "We have wondered about that, sure."

"We have formed a people from the remnant of those who starved through the Undoing in the great East. When the trucks and the trains stopped, the towns emptied themselves out and people streamed north, just as I have seen they did here. Traffic came to a standstill as more and more machines stood abandoned on the roads. Then the time of

Eating began. Those who lived farthest away from the towns did best. We were able to catch food without becoming food ourselves, and as you can see, we were even able to retain our horses, for which Spirit be praised."

"Yeah, the horses 'round here got eaten up," said Magee, reaching again for the creamer.

"We have learned from those who lived here before, and who have become part of our people. Some remembered how to live in such times."

"The Warm Springs folk?"

"Yes! You know of them; I am pleased. The Kah-nee-tas, as you say, and Umatillas and Nez Perce. Klamath is a large band, a mingled people. We are perhaps four thousand, loosely confederated, in more than thirty bands."

"*That* many? Buddy, there's hardly room for ya over there."

Magee was being a little facetious, the Doctor could see. She pursed her lips slightly, and considered giving him a gentle kick beneath the table, but the chieftain went on unperturbed.

"My own party is composed of men, and their slaves, from two bands. I am a Prineville. Some others are Bends. The chieftain at Bend is a great man; he sent us here."

"I get th' picture."

"It is like this. There are a people south of us, of a generation that did not try to emigrate during the time of Eating. They have saved more cattle than we did, and established themselves in a difficult land."

"That would be Nevada."

"As you say. It is becoming very dry there, and as their herds have decreased, they are testing their northern border. They have also some means of preserving the old weapons. They strike at us from a long way off. We have begun to experience border raids, and we are taking unacceptable losses."

"Guns?"

"Our elders say so. The guns make a lot of smoke. So they say it is an older way of making these weapons, that does require the 'factories'."

"Uh huh, artisan gunpowder and old pieces from gunshops, or conversions, or both. So, you got worries."

"We have worries, as you say. So we in leadership came together and said, we will send some to the West, and offer trade. We will make war for you, and in return ... "

"... *we* come over and make some war for *you*. Well, sure."

"And so, we are here. And we will undertake to go north with you ... "

"And cover th' wagon train. So, as you say, there are lots of you and

you travel light and swift, so why *haven't* you just swooped down on us – and taken our toys for your little war?"

"We had very hard times. Many key people have gone. We have more time to make this treaty with you and enact it, than time to learn how to take care of the machines. Also, we have among us a – a prejudice against using them ourselves."

Magee stopped in the midst of pushing away his plate, eyebrows raised. "A prej – I'll be damned. A taboo!"

"What is that?"

"A very old word," said the Doctor. "Tell me, the prejudice, it is a matter of 'Spirit'?"

"As you say."

"Yes. My lord has it right then. You must have allies with machines, but must not touch the machines yourselves. We're qualified because we are outside Spirit's protection."

"Does this offend you?"

Magee laughed aloud. "Not at all, buddy. I think it's downright charming!"

The big Eastsider looked at them both, in momentary confusion. Then he dropped his eyes to his empty plate, and said, "it is very good, this 'kudu'."

"My lord," said the Doctor, "there is a messenger in the hallway, trying to catch your eye."

"Excuse me, if you please, Mr. Lacey, it looks like I should take a call," said Magee, rising. He walked across to the double doors leading to the building's interior.

"Take a call?" Lacey asked.

The Doctor reached across and patted his hand. "We have many things to talk about, I think."

:::

"Hey, Wolf."

Wolf rolled over on the steel shelf, the chain from his shackled neck clattering. He opened his eyes, blinking at the light. That was a familiar but unexpected voice.

"Lockie?"

"Yep. Sorry 'bout ya troubles. So, you're going for a vacation from this hole for awhile."

"Vacation? How so?"

Mullins was standing there as well. "We're rolling tomorrow. Boss says you get to ride the whole way, lucky dog."

"Ride? Ride where?"

"To wherever it is you went before."

Lockerby was holding something in his hands. "Gotcha some leftovers from th' Boss's lunch here."

"Yeah," said Mullins. "We're to take good care of you. You're gonna have th' whole squad compartment of th' LAV to yourself. Chains an' all."

...

Wilson paused, leaning with both hands on the end of the handle of his rake, and looked up – and up.

"That's really something," he said to no one in particular.

Vernie, with an axe over his shoulder, pulled up behind him on the deer trail. "Sightseer."

"Well, it's not something you see every day."

At least three large forest fires were lifting gigantic clouds of smoke and steam into the morning sky, silhouetted against the eastern light. Three columns billowed up, white shot through with rose, to some unimaginable height, driven by their internal heat, then, as they cooled, drifted away, black and gray, into a rust-brown haze toward the southeast, merging into one large cloud high above the mountains.

Errol caught up to them, carrying a heavy-bladed hoe. Like the others, he was also laden with a backpack, a bow, and a couple of half-gallon water bottles. "Map?"

"Got it," replied Wilson, unrolling an ancient Bureau of Land Management map.

"What have we got?"

"We crossed the dry wash – what should have been Blue Creek – right here, and we're at about eleven hundred feet. Ro-eena marked this smoke right up here; we should be about an eighth of a mile from it."

"Feet? Miles?"

"Well, that's what this map uses."

"How can you tell how far things are out here?" asked Vernie.

"These squares are six hundred and forty acres in size; so they're a mile on a side. So I'm guesstimating from that." Wilson laid the map out on a stump and pulled out his antique compass, an aluminum bezel mounted on graduated polystyrene. Setting the compass down on the map, he lined up the device's edge with it, and rotated the map until the compass needle hovered, in the fluid, above the outlined needle painted on the bezel's floor. "Now the 'north' edge of th' map is pointed north. So the 'X' is up that way. I think I see a little cliff between here and there; we'll have to go around. I vote west side of th' rocks."

"Sure. That doesn't look quite like north on the compass, though."

"The painted outline rotates to set what used to be called 'declination.' The needle itself always looks at *magnetic* north. That's east of true north, for us."

"How do we know just where?" asked Errol.

"We don't. Magnetic moves around, an' it's been a long time since anyone could tell us the angle. But I'm giving it eighteen degrees east, based on the map-check Selk gave us. He lined up the map back at Ridge with South Sister mountain and the North Star."

"Sounds good."

"'Good enough for gover'ment work.'"

"How do you know when we've been 'an eighth of a mile?" asked Vernie.

"My McLeod handle."

"Mack-loud?"

"Mmm-hmm, this kind of rake was designed by a fire fighter named McLeod. The handle on this one is six feet, so that's eight hundred and eighty handles to th' mile."

"Oh." Vernie was impressed, as he had been on several occasions, with Wilson's seemingly endless supply of pre-Undoing lore. "Is that why you wave it around sometimes?"

Wilson nodded. "Just to keep my mental picture stat. Thing is, it's so steep out here, we travel a lot more than a mile to cover a map mile."

A very faint sound turned their heads.

Below them, on the path, stood Billee, bow in hand. A wide-brimmed straw hat, Asian style, shaded her face.

"S'just tail-end-Charlie," she offered. "So, are ya gonna go on up? I'd like to do my recon from the rock."

"We'll take a little water break. If you're antsy, go point."

Billee passed around Wilson without a backward glance, nodded to the others, and moved on.

When she was out of earshot, Vernie broke into a grin.

Wilson found himself annoyed. "What?"

Vernie's grin widened. "If you don't know, I'm not telling."

Wilson unshipped a water bottle and uncapped it. "Well, if it's not mission critical I guess it'll keep."

In a few moments the men were climbing again. They passed round to the outcrop's right, pulling themselves up by branch and shrub, and came out into a small opening with a view to the north. Billee stood near the precipice, glassing the blue hills and the valley that opened out before them.

"What's that there?" asked Vernie.

Without turning toward the sound of his voice, Billie answered, "Karen's monocular. I traded them the big glasses for it for field work."

"How is it out there?"

"Trees and smoke; smoke and trees. Coupla hawks, some buzzards. Quiet; which is how I like it." Billee shrugged slightly, shifting the

sling of the .22 rifle and her quiver across her back.

"Are you drinking enough water? It's almost ninety already and all uphill."

"I'm good. You gents leave me here; I'll keep to the shade and get up and glass around every ten minutes or so."

"Sure." Vernie glanced around; Wilson and Errol had already left the opening. "Uhh, Bee?"

She took the monocular down and regarded Vernie guardedly. "Mmh?"

"He likes you, really he does. Just focused on the fires."

"Thank you, Vernie, and I'm focused on security."

Vernie shook his head imperceptibly and caught up with the others.

"K," said Wilson. "See that loner fir with th' white stripe down th' side? I'm guessin' that's our destination."

The men clambered up. Less than a hundred yards of effort, through a steep terrain of young fir and hemlock trees with an understory of viney maple and sword ferns, brought them to the tree. A blackened slab of bark, with rosy fingers of cambium attached, lay at its feet, but there was no sign of fire.

"What now?" asked Errol.

"We sniff around," answered Wilson, looking left and right along the slope.

Vernie wrinkled his nose. "What, it smells like smoke *everywhere*."

"Sorry; I mean look for any, you know, wisps of it rising, or whatever, black spots, anything diff'rent. Oh, *here* we are."

Wilson strode sidehill to a half-buried hemlock log with a sloped heap of duff on its uphill side. A streak of blackened fir needles ran down hill from a small hole in the heap and disappeared among the ferns. "Something must have fallen in with th' squirrels, here." He set down his tool, knelt, and sniffed over the hole. Then he pressed the palm of his hand over it briefly. "Mmph. Errol, let's see the hazel hoe."

Errol extended the hoe toward him handle first. Wilson chopped at the duff pile, exposing a layer of bark dust and dry chips of rotten wood. He stood up. "K, come over and feel that."

Errol, and then Vernie, waved their hands over the spot. It was definitely warmer than the ambient air.

"The top layer doesn't feel like it, but it's got some moisture content," said Wilson, wiping the sweat from his eyes. "So th' fire is damped down and burning *inward* from the surface. Could follow old roots, pop up anywhere around this log in a week or so."

"What do we do?" asked Vernie.

"We'll dig down to mineral soil all around it. Then we'll dig out th' hot spot, scatter th' cinders, and throw cool mineral soil on 'em. Might be here, mm, till the sun's about a hand-and-a-half past noon. Then we'll collect our busy little guard and on to th' next spot."

Vernie looked at Wilson. "Sir?"

"Mmh?"

"Bee's pretty good at what she does."

Wilson unbent a little. "Yeah, know it. I dunno why I even said it that way." They turned and faced the vast northern smoke cloud, rising from somewhere beyond the valley where they knew Roundhouse to be, and craned their necks back, to see where the cloud met, overhead, with the one from the south.

"Tell me again why we're bothering with these little ones?" asked Vernie, breaking the spell.

"They're the ones we can do anything about. And if we leave 'em alone, they grow up to be like those." Wilsom pointed to the roiling sky.

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"What are you doing under there, if I may ask?" Karen prodded Selk's foot with her toe. His legs protruded from beneath the main instrument console of Ridge's Control Room.

"Yow! Scare me, why don't you?"

"Should you be out building the fire line, like everybody else? Hmm?"

"Aww, Karen, I did that last night. I'm off duty."

"I think I knew that; I'm probably just teasing."

Selk wriggled out and sat up, blinking in the light. His eyebrows lifted behind his dusty glasses. "*Teasing?* You know what, you've changed a lot."

"Maybe. Can you help me get the big glasses onto their tripod?"

"Oh! Yeah, that thing's heavy."

"Not so much that, but it's awkward for one hand. Don't want to risk breaking it. Might be the only one like it left, and we'll need it for your satellite work."

"Right, right, and right." Selk brought over the ancient air-raid warden's glasses and set them up.

"Thank you." Karen picked up a scrap of cloth and dabbed at her eyes. The sweat was already getting into them, and she wasn't even at work yet. "It's always hot up here in the afternoons."

"Yeah. Look, I've got a bandanna on and you're all shiny dome. Trick is, cover your head with a wet cloth. That's what the bucket's here for."

"Mmh. I miss my hair."

"We all do. Too many people in here; the lice simply exploded."

Karen peered into the eyepieces and began a slow weep of the eastern horizons through the thick windows. "What is it out there now?"

Selk stepped over to the north window and read the thermometer

hung on the outside. "ninety-six."

"Not as bad as last week."

"And the week before. Mary says there's a breeze from the ocean. If the wind changes back, she doesn't give much for our chances."

Karen swung the glasses to the west window. *Always check the big valley*, Avery had said. *Five, six times an hour. That's where they'll come from.*

The child kicked, hard. "Oof," said Karen involuntarily, and sat back against the firefinder table.

"What, what?" asked Selk, alarmed.

"Nothing. Kid's awake." She returned to the scope.

"Oh. Y'know, I haven't seen a lot of pregnant ladies."

"It's hard to make babies around here these days, says Dr. Marcee. We're not sure why. And I got it on the first try, too."

"Oh! Uhh, need to know basis."

"Hmm?" Karen leaned back and looked at him. "Are you blushing?"

"No," he lied. "I, uh, I got wires to count."

"Huh." Karen went back to the eyepieces.

Nothing out that way but undulating mirages.

With the heat, much of the foliage had dropped from the Valley trees; if anyone were approaching from that direction they would not have the advantage of such thick cover as the bandits had used last year. A surprise was still possible, but less likely. The oblong shapes of long-dead truck trailers showed where the Highway of Death passed through, near the great river. She looked briefly at the blackened top of the "Eagles Nest" cell tower, and thought of the poor young woman who had died there, then swung round to the north. Ball Butte's lookout was on duty; a figure, someone from Maggie's no doubt, sat in the shade of the cement-slab roof that rested on four boulders. Behind the mountain stood a magnificent pall of smoke, alarming till one realized how far away it must be. Half the land between here and Port Land must have burned in the last week; but that fire seemed to be slowing down in the slightly improved weather.

The elevator door opened. Habitually, Karen reached down and touched the hilt of her dagger as she checked to see who it was.

"At ease, Karen, Ames," said Avery, as he rolled forward in the red Quickie, smiling. "Though I'm glad to see you're alert. What's new?"

"Not so much."

Avery, like everyone else, looked completely different without his beard and hair. His had always been close-cropped, but still!

We look too much like the bandits now; that's what's bothering me. Karen remembered, suddenly and intensely, the blue eyes of that last young man she'd killed.

"Is anything wrong?"

"No ... I'm hot."

"Sure you are. Let me get around this maniac's legs here..."

"Hey!" interjected a muffled voice.

"... and I'll tie a nice clean wet bandanna round your head ... you like green? And you can go back to what you're doing."

"Thank you; that helps."

"Not enough ventilation up here; never was."

"Why not?"

"NBC. This facility was expected to stand up to nuclear, biological, or chemical warfare; at least, anything that wasn't a direct hit. So it's fairly tight."

"Oh. My father called that ABC; must be the same thing?" She resumed her sweep around to her right.

"Yes. An older term which he might have found in books. How many smoke teams do we have out?"

"Four. One is up the Creek; the other three are working south of here."

"Who's farthest away?"

"Wilson; they're almost halfway to the Coburg Hills, I think."

Avery rolled up to the table. "How many smokes over there?"

"Six, that we have seen from here. If you will take these and look in the same direction as the alidade sight on the table ... "

Avery did so.

"There's a rock face on the north face, third valley over. Right above there ... that would be the first smoke's position as recorded."

"Well, whaddya know."

"What?"

"I can see them. Just barely, through the murk. They're on that one now."

"Oh! Well, then, they have five to go, and should be home in seven days from now. Maybe six."

"It's slow going."

"Yes."

"Well, carry on, as they used to say." He re-mounted the heavy field glasses on their tripod, then backed away. As Karen resumed her post, he noticed the automotive AM-FM radio on the side table, wires running from it to a transformer plugged into the wall. "Selk?"

"Sir?" Selk was tucked out of sight in the works, but his voice sounded clearly enough in the round room.

"Do we still do radio sweeps?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Not much out there, sir."

"What's 'not much'?"

"Most of the bands now are just 'cosmic hiss.' Nothing from Old Mexico. Nothing from the old U.S. Some Canadian stuff. We think they took over Alaska. It's all advice, mostly; how to do things with

fruit trees and gardens, how to fix windmills, broken legs, whatever. None of it seems like two-way traffic. Some music."

"Music? They have time to broadcast *music*?"

Selk crawled out and sat up, screwdriver in hand.

"Sir, they're not as hot there as we are here. Some of their forests don't even have the bark beetles yet. It's what's left of civilization."

"I think I knew that. It's where all the Pilgrims were going."

"Yes, sir; some of the advice used to be about how to *dispose* of Pilgrims, sir."

"Not enough room in the lifeboat. They do to us what we were doing to the Mexicans."

"They were; but we don't hear so much about the Pilgrims now."

"Couldn't we talk to them?" asked Karen. "Make a transmitter?"

Avery looked at her. "That was voted down some time ago. Don't want to broadcast our presence to any warlords nearby. And nothing the Canucks can do for us so far away, and we with nothing to offer them."

Selk added, "Not as if they don't have troubles of their own. Like I said, how to set a broken leg. Doesn't sound like there's much more to eat there than there is here, either."

Avery poked at the radio with an index finger. "How about Roseburg?"

"They went off the air two weeks ago."

"They *did*? That's significant, maybe. I don't remember hearing about it."

"I'm sorry. I meant to say something to Dr. Mary but I was preoccupied." He waved apologetically at the mass of wiring behind him.

"It doesn't matter, I suppose, because I can't think of anything different we'd be doing for knowing it. But it's a lapse. Leave that stuff alone today and go get your sleep like you're supposed to be doing, and then tonight run surveys with this thing your entire shift and report to me the results tomorrow."

Selk looked down at his screwdriver, then set it aside and stood up. "Yes, sir." He closed the cabinet door, dusted himself and made for the doorway.

Karen continued her sweep.

Avery sat beside her in his wheelchair, fingers tapping on the arms. She became aware he was watching her.

Suddenly he spoke. "Think I was too hard on him?"

She kept up her sweep. "No, sir. It was a change and we are to report changes."

"We're a sloppy crew these days. He's a little off, I'm a little off, everybody's a little off. Short rations, itchy bugs, bad air, *hot*, little prospect of a harvest, your thing with the Bledsoes not resolved,

Roundhouse hasn't shown up with that Cat. You, though, you still seem pretty focused. You and Marcee."

"Sir, your mom, she's really tired all the time now, but she's pretty focused, isn't she?"

He smiled. "Barking orders at me from Hall over the phone, day and night. Yes, she is. And Mrs. Perkins, she spells her, and she's the same way."

"Well, that would be it, sir. Mrs. Molinero, too, the way she's running the kitchens now."

"Your point?"

Karen turned away from the glasses momentarily. She gave a slight shrug with her armless shoulder. "We're mothers."

∴

"So, is it dead yet?" Vernie, sweating profusely, sat down on a convenient rock in the shade.

Wilson leaned on the McLeod and took in the scene. They had plowed up the ground for a good twenty feet in all directions. "As good as. Best we can do, anyway. Mr. Errol, could you whistle up Bee and have her lead out to th' top of th' ridge? We should look on the other side before heading out."

The sun had by now moved well to the west, and hung low and red in a citrus sky.

Billee answered Errol's short blast with two of her own and came toiling up through the ferns.

"How is it out there?" asked Wilson.

She glared. "Still quiet; down to one buzzard."

Errol and Vernie looked amused. Wilson wasn't quite sure how to respond, and ended up rattling the map. He tapped it.

"Got another spot marked on the west end of this spur, only half a mile away. We could look at it, then bed down for th' night. But we should peek over th' top before traveling along th' ridgeline."

"Sure." Billee headed off past the blasted fir.

"K, smoke jumpers," said Wilson. "Another sip, packs on, tools up, sidehill till we get the all clear."

Instead, there was a long blast on Billee's whistle. They dropped gear, picked out their weapons, and raced up to the ridgeline.

Billee was not under cover at all, but standing in a saddle of the mountain, in a small opening full of dried-up bear grass, facing south. As they came up on either side of her, each understood immediately what had prompted her signal.

On the far side of the valley a bright orange glow backlit the underside of a cloud bank of smoke that seemed much closer than they would have guessed, earlier in the day. Even as they watched, a



tongue of red flame reached up from beneath a tall tree on the opposite side and spread to its upper branches. The wind from the heat set all the firs on that ridgeline dancing, then one and another of them seemed to explode into flame. Showers of sparks cascaded down into the shadows on the north slope before them, and hot spots flared and grew in contrast to the surrounding darkness. The sound of pitch pockets bursting, like cannon fire, came to them across the wide air, and a small river, a few pools of which had not yet run dry, began reflecting the inferno up to them from the valley below.

A deer ran up into the clearing, making directly for them. Billee and Vernie jumped left; Wilson and Errol to the right. The doe made for the gap, leaped through, and was gone.

"Eff!" said Vernie.

"That's it, folks," said Wilson, matter-of-factly. "We're *very* done here; let's run for home."

∴

"Mullins." Lockerby offered a sardonic salute, touching the brim of his slouch hat with his forefinger.

"Lockerby."

"We've got that Cat running and are good to go."

"Fine; we'll line out, as the Boss says and take it as it goes." Mullins waved the crawler forward. The rest of the column would wait and move up whenever the Cat was in danger of rolling too far ahead. Eastsiders, almost ghostly on their horses in the gray dawn, filtered into the forest on either flank.

The D-8 rumbled across the clearing and reached the point where the Pilgrim Trail disappeared into the undergrowth, between a burned-out Chevy Volt and a Mercedes delivery truck lying on its side, with a tree emerging from the driver-side window. The wide blade settled on the ground and the Cat inched ahead, ripping small trees out of broken pavement or shearing them off at ground level. The ancient dead vehicles groaned as the blade nudged them aside. Bones, which had been hidden beneath the truck, shattered as the blade came to them.

After about eighty feet, the mound of detritus piling up in front of the blade began to tower over it, spilling splintered wood and dirt between the hydraulic arms. The driver reversed levers, walking the machine back while also raising the blade slightly, then lowered it again and shoved the left lever forward, easing the huge machine a quarter turn to the right, and pushing aside the pile so as to be able to make a fresh assault.

"S'gonna be a long day, Mull." Lockerby leaned back against the bow of the LAV-35.

"You know it, Lockie. Hot, too." Mullins squatted next to him, cradling a short-barreled Mossberg pump shotgun in his hands. "I give it about three hours after th' sun comes up, they'll be howling to park that thing in th' shade."

"How far is it to the first objective?"

"Th' ghost town? 'Bout sixty miles."

"Eff, at this pace we'll be a week gettin' there."

"More than a week. Even though some of th' terrain is not this radical. The stuff they made this road out of has slowed the woods down some. But, yah, s'till a long slog and, y'know, we've only got so

many replacement parts for that museum piece up there. If we get it over Rice Hill we'll be on our way."

They looked up at the smoke cloud to the northeast. The day before, like a malevolent storm, it had towered to seemingly stratospheric heights, in appearance a cross between a nuclear blast cloud and a cumulonimbus, gray and white with a burnt-sienna halo. This morning, it mostly covered the horizon like a pall of heavy smog.

"Not comin' our way, is it?" asked Lockerby.

No, if anythin', I think it's goin' the same way we are. With any luck it'll clear th' way a bit for th' column."

Lockerby leaned around the right front tire of the LAV and looked over their infantry. Sitting on the ground, men wearing a motley collection of camo and fatigue ex-Army wear and assorted other gear – a few had armor, even fewer wore MOLLEs – most had assorted old backpacks, including one that was covered with cartoons of a duck in a sailor suit – they sat along the edge of the clearing, bows and crossbows in hand, most of them.

"Y'know, Mullins, I could wish th' morale was a little higher here at th' outset. We're a glum bunch."

"Know it. There's a few things we c'n do to perk 'em up, but not much, short of lucking into a crew of women Pilgrims. It bugs 'em that the Eastsiders have stuff they don't. Tell ya what, who's th' glummost?"

"I worry about Kinnet; I think he grouses too much to th' others when he thinks I can't hear 'im."

"Call him over."

"Sir." Lockerby stood away from the tire.

"Kinnet!"

A man about sixty feet away grabbed his crossbow, stood up from among his fellows, and trotted up to the head of the motorized column. He touched his hat. "Lockerby."

"See Mullins here."

"Lockerby."

"Kinnet."

Kinnet stepped round to the front. "Mullins, sir."

"Kinnet, my man."

"Sir."

"Life treatin' you alright?"

"Sir? Uh, yes, sir, it is, sir."

Lockerby could see the man was in a swivet; was he about to be made an example of?

Mullins stood up and patted the armored bow of the LAV.

"How would you like to learn to drive this honey?"

...

Vernie felt almost as if he were drowning; practically running all night long was one thing; but the day had dawned warm and was now hot already, and their water was gone. His side troubled him more and more; he ran, holding it as if he were afraid it would burst, and, with both hands occupied, found that sweat was pouring into his eyes faster than he could blink it away. He collided with a tree trunk that lay at right angles to the ground, four feet up in the air.

"Vernie, you got to go under those." Wilson's voice, but Vernie could not tell from where. He crawled under the log, but met another, lower one, and stood up, struggling to climb over it.

"Wilson, he's done in. We all are, really; I've seen you fall down a couple of times yourself," Errol panted.

"Yeah, know it. Dammit, we must have gone left of the creek. Now we're in a blowdown. Everybody take five. Bee, you seem to recover quickest, when you're up to it, scout around t'th' right? For a way t'th' water?"

Billee's eyes thanked him for the rest. She needed it as much as the others, but would give her last ounce of strength not to admit it. She sat down hard, then rolled over onto her side, trying to get control of her ragged breath. It hurt to breathe; her throat and lungs screamed for water, and she knew her lips were cracked and swollen. *Not very attractive like this, now, are we?* she asked herself, mockingly. *But at least we'll be first up. Maybe ...* but she was too dry to complete any thought about affairs of the heart.

They might have rested longer, but Errol's sharp ears picked up the change in tone of the fire's voice. It had roared up the back of the ridge in front of them, the day before, cooking resins in the timber and exploding trees left and right. In the night it had moved more slowly, working its way down to the riverbed by fits and starts, showers of sparks among dry grasses leading the way. Now it was growling and booming again, climbing a dessicated south slope through the treetops. From the sound, it should cross yet another ridge within the hour. Their lacerated skins, their scratched faces, their leaden arms and legs and frightened beating hearts would not long abide the arrival of such an adversary.

"Wilson?" Errol raised his head.

"Yah." Wilson swung round. "Bee, how are ya?"

"On it." She slipped out of her gear, left her bow and precious little rifle resting against it, rolled up, staggered against a conk-encrusted grand fir, then trotted off.

"Vernie, how are ya?"

Vernie wheezed a couple of times before replying. "Not great. Help me up in a little bit?"

"You bet."

Billee was back before they were up. Giving up on speech, she simply pointed and nodded. *This way.*

Helping Billee into her things first, the little group staggered up and made off sidehill behind her, catching their feet on every root and trailing blackberry in their way, till the terrain dropped off precipitously and they all caught at ocean-spray, hazel, and mountain alder saplings as they descended. At last they came to the one thing in the world they hoped to see: Blue Creek.

Or what was left of it. The drought had stopped the flow of the stream, but by following the dry wash downstream to the north, they came to a pool in deep shade, with fern-lined rock faces to either side. The coolness, as much as the prospect of water, revived them.

"Don't anybody jump in yet; it'd mess up the drinkin' water," Wilson croaked, then produced an old cup, of bright yellow plastic. He dipped it through the layer of algae on the surface, then brought it up half full, tipped so as not to catch much of the green stuff, then handed it to Billee. "Slowly. Not too much."

She nodded, took the cup and dipped her cracked lips first, then sipped at it. She handed the cup on to Vernie, who, thirsty as he was, looked at the swirling green and black flecks dubiously.

"It *might* kill ya, Vernie. But think of th' alternative." Wilson might have grinned but it would have hurt too much.

Billee poked at the algae in the pool with her bow, clearing a view into the shallows. "See?" she asked Vernie. Something red flashed on the bottom, backing away from the bow.

Vernie finished the cup and handed it to Errol, who knelt by the creek and dipped the cup again. "See what?"

"Crawdad. Dad's a sign of clean water."

"I was thinking if some of that is blue-green algae..."

Wilson shrugged. "We all are. We got no choice. But it's early in th' season for bee-gee. Hopefully we won't get anythin' worse than th' runs; giardia. Let's fill all th' canteens, take a quick dip. Two more mountains to cross."

Billee looked at Vernie, who sat now with his feet in the water, mechanically dipping handfuls of wet green slime onto his head and shoulders. She returned her gaze to Wilson. "Can we even do it?"

Wilson, surprised, felt the full impact of that gaze. He'd known Billee as a toddler. *When the hell did she grow up? I had no idea.* "Not really. What we can do, like old Mary says, is go sideways. We'll hit the river at Lawson's and run round to Bridge. It's twice as far, but flat, with a trail."

An explosion behind them, far up the mountain, heralded the arrival of the fire. Echoes from the burst rolled around the valley and came back to them from the far hills.

Ro-eena stood up, stretched again, and walked over to the field glasses. She almost tripped over Selk, who had been up much of the night. Applying her still-sleepy eyes to the eyepieces, she swung the field of view toward the South Fire. "Oh-oh," she said to the empty Control Room.

Savage Mary, looking even more frightful with her recently shaved head, rolled in. "I hate that."

Ro-eena turned to greet her. "Ma'am?"

"Any time anybody says, 'Oh-oh.' Doc Chaney was working on my old knees once, with me tied down and a bone in my teeth, and he went 'oh-oh' and I spit the bone out and about ripped myself loose. 'What, what?' says I. 'Nothin', says he. 'Whaddya mean, nothin?' says I. 'I know what "oh-oh" means.' Sunnabitch *laughed*. Oh, well. I'm a prime argument for entropy; I'll never be out of this chair or a bed again. So what's up, kid?"

"The fire is over Folsom Mountain."

"Well, we knew that would be right about now. Th' sling psychrometer showed nineteen percent humidity yesterday, and th' duff hygrometer says seven percent at an inch underground, and that's on the north side of Ridge. We are at about th' best conditions for a blow-up I've ever heard of."

"But we have a smoke team over there, ma'am."

"Yes, we do. And likely to lose 'em. I can't help 'em, nor you can't help 'em. So we do what we do. Karen and Deela, for example, are loading twenty-twos to beat th' band. Most everybody else is cuttin' fire line. You're watching for more fires."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Aw, I shouldn't be hard on ya. Heat's got me crabby. I'm drenched in this naw-ga-hide seat. Show me your South Fire."

Ro-eena cranked down the tripod a few inches and stepped back. Selk stirred in his blanket and pulled a corner of it over his head. Mary rolled past him and leaned forward in her chair to reach the eyepieces.

"Mmm ... hmmm ... " Mary panned left and right for a few seconds and wheeled round to face her young friend. A broad, wry smile creased her craggy features. "Yep. Ugly. You might as well look everywhere else but there, honey. It's apt to go to one-oh-five this afternoon, and if it does, that one will be over th' Calapooya and in our laps by sundown. Tell ya what. I'll spell ya here, won't ya run down to th' pee-ex and get me some homebrew. Times like this, about all ya can do is have beer for breakfast."

Marleena sat by the circle of red light on the floor of Roundhouse, rubbing deerhide with her scraper. That light had been red for days; daylight passed through thick clouds of smoke far above the valley, and by the time it reached the smokehole at the peak of the roof, had dimmed considerably. Near the pool of light from the smokehole was the only place she could see to work well, unless she went outside; but outside was too hot these days.

The area near the firepit and the well was the commons; here meetings were held, and those who felt like eating together did so; toward the walls were the sleeping pallets. The Roundhouse had room in it for a hundred to sleep, though their numbers were down to around fifty. More like forty at the moment she thought sourly, with parties of men gadding off to Oz, as she thought of it in her mind: something from a story of her mother's. Starvation Creek, the Emerald City. *Ha! "They have this, they have that! You should see it!"* Only one thing she wished to know; if Roundhouse were attacked, would these wonderful wizards come to their aid? "Would they die for us?"

"They might."

"Josep! Home at last. Did I say that out loud?" She covered her mouth with her hand. "Have you eaten?"

"I have Bolo with me; he's looking for Jorj. We have not, and would appreciate food, wife." Josep smiled, shyly.

Marleena stood up, a bit stiffly, and stepped over to the well, where a bucket stood on a sideboard half full. With an old mug, she dipped up a cupful of water for her man, and gave it to him, then fetched a bag of pemmican strips, handing him one.

"The Lord be praised for you that you are my wife," Josep said as he took the pemmican.

"The Lord be praised for you that you are my husband," she replied. She looked round the room. A few of the older people were abed near the walls; someone turned over and lay still. Flies buzzed. "Did not everyone return with you? Where is Miss Krall?"

"They are helping with fire lines. Krall has taken up with a fine young man named Tomma. She is enjoying herself and is good for morale. Some of these people have never *seen* a dog." Josep, chewing, looked round, then spoke with his mouth full. "Roundhouse so empty!"

"We are in hunting camps. The fires have confused the animals and so the men are killing them and the women are dressing meat and hides. I am keeping an eye on the old people, but they have brought me some work to do, even so."

"This is always the way with us. We cannot defend ourselves if we hunt enough; and if we are prepared to defend ourselves we cannot

hunt enough. And this year there will be no crops and little fish." He looked at the cup with distaste.

"I am sorry about the water, my husband; the water in the well is very low."

"And, yes, there is the well. I know you do not like the idea of joining with the people to the south; but they are more than a hundred; they have food; they have weapons, they have electricity and most of them have good hearts."

"Electricity?"

"Yes, there is a generator of some kind in a hill."

"We have electricity. In a way."

"Yes, when Deerie is running. But she needs most of it for herself; and as Jorj says, when you run a machine it is spending a part of its life."

"Bolo is looking for Jorj ... "

"To ask for Deerie, yes. She is needed for the fire lines around the fields at the Creek."

"I knew it!" Marleena fairly spat the words. "You will lead us there, and give everything we have to these people whom we do not know, and Roundhouse will be no more."

"It is always wisest, wife, to seek to do the wisest thing. I must find the hunters and hold talk; everyone's mind should be spoken on this thing." Only now did Josep shed a strange backpack that he was carrying; he set it down at her feet.

"What is this thing?" she asked.

"It is a kind of packsack that was made in the old days. In it are pieces of dried apples, pears and apricots for the people. Enough for more than half a pound for each of us."

As Josep expected, this did put another view of the inhabitants of the Creek in Marleena's mind; though he knew she would have to think long and hard.

"Do you know where I might find Jorj? I must send him back with Bolo if I can."

Marleena, with eager, shaking hands, tugged at the paracord with which the pack had been cross-tied. "I think, he took one more turn around the fields with Deerie yesterday; so today he would be cleaning out the ashes in the burner and doing what he does with oils and fats."

Josep reached into the pemmican sack again. "I will go to the Shed, then. It seems the likeliest place. And then I will look for the hunters – are they all upstream?"

"Yes." Marleena reached into the top of the packsack and filled her hands with dried apples.

Jorj, a late middle-age, balding man with a round nose, was not happy. When he was not happy he sometimes picked at his nose; and already the tip of it was blackened with soot. "Bolo, I like you; and I admire the young chief; but there is such a thing as madness."

"Yes, Jorj. But Josep says the fields there would feed them *and* us in good years."

"That's just it; does *this* look like a good year to you? Besides, Deerie would never survive the trip. As it is I pray every time I light the tinder in the burn box."

They stood beside a crawler tractor that was no taller than they were themselves. The tiny 'cat' had seen better days. Once it had been painted green, with yellow accents. Now it was more brown than green, with a six-foot blade, a steel cage, a black seat within the cage, with most of the stuffing long gone. The blade had long ago lost its hydraulics and had been raised and lowered for some time with a prized come-along.

Above the drawbar a shelf, really a platform, had been added, on which stood a contraption consisting of two tallish cylinders, with an exhaust pipe protruding from the one on the left. Pipes had been led past the driver's seat on either side to the engine. The parts for this adaptation had all been handmade, and though Jorj understood mechanics, he was painfully aware of the unlikelihood of ever replacing them.

Josep joined the men in the shade of the Shed. "The Lord greet you, Jorj."

"And the good Lord greet you, Young Josep. But are you not here to grieve my heart?"

"Ah, would it were not so. With your years should come a time of rest. And here I am asking of you the hardest thing yet."

Jorj noticed his sooty hands and wiped them on a cloth hanging from one of the fir poles of the open shed. "How far away is this Starvation Creek, then? And I must admit I don't much care for the name."

"You have only two ridgelines to cross. But some of it is trail-breaking."

"Sounds like you're not coming along, then."

"I'm going to call a meeting. It may be the time of Migration."

At that dread word, silence fell over them. They turned as one to look, in the dimming light, at Jorj's beloved fields.

Ro-eena came into the PX and almost bumped into Juanita Molinero, who was carrying a very large and heavy stock-pot with Guchi.

"Oh, hi, Ro-eena," said Juanita. "You are may be just in time to take this side of this thing from me and help Guchi get it to the tables, yes?"

"Well, I'm still on upstairs and Doc Mary asked me to go get her a beer."

"I am not may be as happy as I could wish with this use of the refrigeration units, but Doctor Mary does outrank me; go around us and we will 'carry on.'" Juanita smiled.

Ro-eena continued on her mission, and Juanita and Guchi, almost staggering, brought the pot to the dining area. Karen sat at the nearest table with her first Creek friend, Mrs. Ames, and elderess Ava Lazar. Karen jumped up to make way for the pot.

"What's in it, dears?" asked Mrs. Lazar.

"It is mostly a broth from beef jerky and suet, I am afraid," replied Juanita, looking at Mrs. Ames sympathetically. "With some grabbed potatoes and garden leaves thrown in."

"Maybe a little oats, too. Not much," added Guchi. They both smiled apologetically.

"It will be what we will give thanks for, my dears." Mrs. Lazar patted Juanita's hand. "Thank you both, and we will share it with the other tables." Juanita and Guchi nodded appreciatively, and left for the kitchen.

"Mn-nh-rnh!" said Mrs. Ames, wagging her head at a crooked angle.

"Yes, that's right," nodded Mrs. Lazar. "You feel for the cows and the oxen; but, you know, we had really run out of ways to feed them, and we must put away everything we can, to see another year."

Karen set out bowls, then, finding a ladle hung from the lip of the stock pot, dipped for each of them and also for others who came to them with their bowls.

The entire Creek, carrying what they could, had migrated to the depths of Ridge. For several days, parties of three or five had made their way up the winding ox-cart road, bringing weapons, clothing, tools, medications, grains, crocks of fermented vegetables and sacks of dried fruits. A significant portion of the food had once been their prized cattle and sheep. Most of these had now been slaughtered; the rest, along with all the chickens, had been left with gates open in all directions, to seek such sustenance and to escape such fire as they might encounter.

The horses had been deemed of civil and military necessity and

would be brought in at the last moment. Their hay was already in storage at Ridge. Currently they were all away with "runners," taking water and sustenance to those on the firelines, or seeking for the missing smoke teams. As there could not be enough hay for all the animals that might need it, there would be much beef and mutton on the menu for some time to come.

Karen sat down to Mrs. Ames' bowl, pulling it to her and then taking up the spoon. She dipped it in the soup, which steamed enticingly, and blew on it a couple of times, then sampled a few drops to gauge temperature before offering it to Mrs. Ames.

Mrs. Lazar shook her head. "Ah, when I was a girl, how different was my world. Do you know, I have not seen electric lighting, and food cooked so – it would be over twenty years, I am sure. And ventilation – do you hear the fans?" She reached up with a paper napkin to dab at Mrs. Ames' chin.

"Yes, replied Karen. "To me they are entirely new, or anyway since before coming to Ridge. I'm not sure I have seen paper used in this way, either." She offered Mrs. Ames another spoonful.

"Oh, yes, you were the Underground Girl. Well," sighed Mrs. Lazar, "I was my family's treasure – the best schools, and Temple school as well. I had fine clothes, and we all went to Temple for Shabbos, and we observed festivals and did everything as it was commanded. A strict but not entirely unhappy upbringing. I meant to go to Israel, to work on a kibbutz. But then everything changed. No Israel, for starters."

"I know a little about the wars. But tell me about 'kibbutz'."

"To tell, now, maybe it's not so much. It is a commune, may be an agricultural commune. Much like our Creek. But the children were raised all together and the parents, they maybe worked in the orange groves." She gave Mrs. Lazar a pat with the napkin at the sagging corner of her mouth.

"But you didn't get to go."

"No, everything just blew up, as you might say. And then we were on the run."

"Your family?"

"My family? *All* my people, everyone from the Temple, we were hunted. The Klux army looked for us in holes in the earth, and came to kill us as if we were rats that had been at the grain."

"Why?"

"'Why'? We were Jewish, that has always been for some enough 'why'."

"You had – you had a husband?"

"Ah, listen to the girl. She too is a widow – it is in her voice. Yes, I had a good man, and children, and I lost everyone, except a granddaughter. I raised Aleesha here."

"Oh." Karen set down the spoon.

"'Oh', she says, and her eyes fill with tears for me, and for my family, a little. You are a toughie but you have a heart, and I thank God for you." Mrs. Lazar smiled sadly, and picked up the spoon for Mrs. Ames.

"Mnahn!" said Mrs. Ames emphatically.

"Are we done?" asked Karen.

Mrs. Ames shook her head. "No, I think she wants you to know she lost her family in the same way. Her man was dark like Mr. Perkins. He and her children were hunted too – by that monster, Magee."

"Why did he *do* these things?"

"Doctor Tom seems to know something about him, from the Murchisons. He tells me Magee joined the Klux to survive, and rose through the ranks. He hunted us because it is what the Klux did. Himself, he cared little either way. A life, to him, it is something to put out, like a candle. What they used to call a professional soldier."

"Weren't the Murchisons professional?"

"Oh, my dear!"

"It's a reasonable question," said a man's voice. Karen recognized it as that of Avery Murchison, who must have rolled quietly up behind her. She felt her face go hot.

Avery rolled round behind Mrs. Ames, and looked over at Karen. "It's all in whatever cause you sign onto. Or, if that cause falters, you may sign onto no more than your own survival, or perhaps even sign onto a cause you think you can believe in. My parents believed in the United States of America. Then, left to their own devices, they dreamed up this community and gave their loyalty to that. Mr. Magee never fully believed in the Klux – he believes in himself. But while they lasted, he was their most feared captain, and whomever they sought to destroy, he destroyed. It was what used to be called a 'job.' It paid in food."

Karen remembered again the young man with blue eyes that had died on top of her. "*We were looking for food.*" So had she been. Was that what the Creek was to her – a job?

"I know," said Avery, watching her. "Maybe these things don't bear too much looking into."

"These troubles may be good for us in the long run," offered Mrs. Lazar.

"How so?" Avery reached for a bowl.

"Every thing that may abide the fire, ye shall make it go through the fire, and it shall be clean."

"'Leviticus' again?"

"Numbers." Mrs. Lazar turned to Karen. "Youth is not all of wisdom, though I think more highly of this young man than he believes."

Bobbo came to the table, carrying his new twenty-two single-shot rifle and the sword that had been Karen's. "Sirs."

"Report?" asked Avery.

"Two smoke parties are in; third one not heard from yet."

Karen asked, "Which party is still out?"

"Wilson's. They were the farthest away, and the fire on the ridges has already passed their last known position. We're still hoping; there is some open ground."

Karen could think of nothing more to say than "thank you;" but her heart ached for her friends.

Avery thanked Bobbo as well, and sent him for some dinner. He reached for his chair wheels.

Karen touched his armrest. "Mr. Avery?"

"Yes, Karen."

"Sirs'?"

"Consider yourself promoted. There's a meeting in about an hour; we'll put a bell on the pee-ay – two rings. Be there; meeting room off the Control Room."

"Yes, sir."

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Jorj loaded the last of the wood blocks and fastened on the lid of the burner with a hoop and clamp. "This has to 'brew up' awhile, to get enough gases to burn right. In about ten more minutes we'll be off."

Josep looked dubiously at the trailer, filled with chunked firewood, shackled to the drawbar. "How far will this get you?"

"Over the first hill, maybe. Good dry wood is not an issue under these conditions, though. Bolo can bust up some old lumber for me in the next valley. The real danger is, I'll start my own forest fire and then we'd lose Deerie for good. Not to mention me and Mr. Bolo."

"Then we must be very careful, Mr. Jorj," replied Bolo solemnly.

"It will be an epic journey," smiled Josep. "I wish I could be with you two. The Lord watch between me and thee..."

"...when we are absent from one another." Jorj clasped hands with Josep, and then Bolo did the same.

∴

The child had been doing calisthenics and now seemed to be resting, with a knee or foot thrust against Karen's navel. She looked out the long, low windows of the Control Room, as she passed through to the meeting room. *Not much of a world I'm bringing you into, kid. Sorry about that.* The foot pressed a little harder.

Tomma and Armon arrived, not looking especially comfortable with each other. Behind them came Emilio. All were disheveled, sweaty,

and dirty, and with their close-cropped heads, had the appearance of lightly toasted demons – they looked like bandits, in fact. As she had done before many times, whenever she noticed this, Karen reached up and rubbed her own crew cut. When would she get used to it?

Marcee, who was nearing term, drifted heavily in and sank into a chair. She had found a large sheet of paper somewhere; it looked as though it had been a page from a ledger of some kind. By folding and re-folding, she had made it into a fan, which she spread and began fanning herself.

Avery rolled in, in his red chair, looked over the room, and rolled up to the empty space at the table next to Marcee. "When are you due?"

"Towards the end of the next moon, sir."

He looked past her to Karen. "And, since we're on the subject, you?"

"Probably before the moon after harvest, sir."

"Harvest. Hmmhm." He furrowed his brow.

Emilio looked round the table. "I am unused to seeing such a table without Doctor Tom, or Elsa, Ellen and the other Elders present."

"Age has crept up on some of us more quickly than in former times," replied Avery. "Dr. Tom, only in the last moon, has begun talking in circles. Mrs. Ames may not last the summer. My mom's active but tires easily; she keeps asking those round her to get her back to her old post on Ball Butte but I'm not sure they even have a way, now, to do that. And so on. How did Mrs. Lazar seem to you?" he turned again to Karen.

"She's very helpful to Mrs. Ames and still useful to Dr. Marcee – yes? –" Marcee nodded, and handed the fan to Karen. "– but seems terribly uninterested in the future, if you know what I mean."

Avery nodded. "Same with old Maggie, though she hasn't noticed it herself. And Dr. Savage is dealing with the advanced stages of –"

"Rheumatoid arthritis. And probably lupus," offered Marcee.

"– right. So, you see, the Council has moved on, at least for the moment."

Emilio pursed his lips, then leaned forward with his next query. "Ro-eena? Cal?"

"Well, there it is. Record-keeping was big with Mom and Dad, but we're down to a hundred and twenty, with more to do than we can do. To stay alive, we're going on short rations with all that civilization stuff."

"Ah."

Avery twisted his wheels a bit so as to directly face Armon of Bledsoe's. "So here you are, Mr. Armon, you're in – not *at*, but *in* – a Council meeting, more or less duly constituted. Feel the power?"

All eyes fell upon Armon, who fidgeted a bit in his chair, then placed his massive arms upon the tables, fingers laced together. "I –

uh, I get it, so maybe you could get on with the meetin'?"

"Depends. Anything more you can tell us about that wire across the stairs at Hall?"

Karen, still fanning herself gratefully, saw Armon tense up, and from the corner of her eye she also noticed Avery's right hand was not resting on his wheelchair's armrest or wheel but on the pommel of his throwing knife. *I would be fanning myself at such a moment*, she thought. But probably there were enough good hands in the room that the situation, if it were one, was covered. She kept fanning.

Armon looked down at the table. "I'll tell you all I know, and it isn't much. Some of us were doing a lot of grousing about Ridge – "

Avery watched him. "Bledsoes and Maggies?"

"And a few – a very few Russells and Wendlers. And as we weren't talking much to anybody else, with so much work in hand, we went round and round and made out Ridge and Hall and Ames was, like settin' 'emselves up for th' big britches, like."

"Sure. So someone wanted to, shall we say, 'restore democracy.'"

"I can tell you two things. One, wasn't me. If I'd wanted to do that, it woulda been way too soon, nothin' was organized enough by then."

Avery smiled. "I like the sound of that; it's an honesty I can appreciate."

Emilio and Tomma nodded assent.

"Two, don't know who did. Still don't. If I did, I'd take it outa their hide."

"I really think you might. So what was that at the bottom of the stairs?" Avery jerked his chin toward Karen, who by this time had returned the fan to Marcee.

"I, uh, I tried to take advantage of the moment. Break up the power structure, y'could say."

"Was that well thought out, do you think?"

Armon tilted his head sideways, and his face took on a surprisingly childlike expression.

"Nope."

Avery's smile broadened. "Mr. Armon, I think you're coming along nicely. With the assent of the others present, I'll speak for us all and say that we won't ask you to bring anyone to Council if you find they had a hand in it – for *now*. Please do, in such an event, explain Creek policy *once*: which is *all for all*. And then tell them if you see further activity proposed or undertaken along these lines, that you *will* bring them to the Council of which you are a *full member*. That work for you?"

Armon looked as if a great weight had been lifted from his broad shoulders. "Uhh, yeah. Does."

"Great. All in favor here?"

Karen added her voice to the others, reluctantly.

Avery noticed. "Seeing as we need *everyone* if we can possibly manage it. Now, before we proceed with the agenda, anything to say to our one-armed hellion here?" Avery gestured with his chin again.

Armon, clear-eyed, for once, turned to Karen. "I apologize. For my attitude below and lyin' about it above."

Karen looked up at him. "Accepted." *Right up to the moment you backslide. And not a second after.*

Avery reached into the slim saddlebag of his chair, fished out a spiral-bound blue notepad with yellow daisies on the cover, and slapped it on the table.

"Agenda."

Karen looked over at Tomma, who had slumped in his seat. "Distracted?"

"Yes."

"Wilson's got a great crew; they'll think of *something*." She turned. "Mr. Avery, shall we get Tomma's report first, so he can go connect with any rescue attempt that might be going forward?"

"A very kind thought, Mrs. Allyn. Tomma, your progress?"

∴

Vernie fell again, his legs turned to jelly from heat and exhaustion. Errol and Wilson stripped off his tools, weapons and pack, and lifted him to his feet. Billee, who had forged ahead, turned back to face them, illuminated by the flaring of gases in the cloud behind them. Trees all around were bending as the fire fed itself air.

Wilson pondered for a moment whether to try for the saddle of Ridge or follow the river toward Bridge. As he thought, the wind seemed to intensify; a branch fell heavily somewhere. The roar of the burn deepened. As one, the men turned to see what Billee, now open-mouthed, was watching. A tower of flame rose from the mountain they had just descended. The fire was not only torching trees and everything else on the heights, but lifting much of the fuel into itself to burn in the upper air. From the looming mushroom-shaped cap of the steam-and-flame-laced column, blackened sticks and even small rocks showered down, glittering with sparks, creating spot fires all along the broad slope behind them. A snake-like shape fell from above, smoking, close by, and set a cedar tree alight.

"Blow-up," said Wilson, matter-of-factly. "Never mind Ridge. We'll make for Lawson's."

Billee broke her reverie. "There's nothing there!"

"That's the idea! The whole place already burned once, and there's still the cellar."

Billee scooped up Vernie's things and led out. Half-walking, half-carrying Vernie, the men followed her down to the almost-dry river,

crossed the water ankle-deep, scrambled up the other side, and emerged from the cottonwoods into such daylight as the offered. In less than half an hour, they came to the burned-over farmyard and shell of the house with its hollowed-out stone walls, and raced up the steps.

Within the walls, the floor had collapsed, and burned joists and the like lay in a tangle, with a few weeds sprouted among them. Wilson and his crew from Ridge, during the New Moon War, had attacked Wolf's rear guard here, sequestered such things as could easily be carried away, and set the place on fire to deny the bandits a provisioned retreat.

With care, realizing that much of the wreckage was capable of giving way beneath them, the crew picked their way across the charred heap of timbers to the staircase, only partly burned, that led to the cellar. Wilson and Errol helped Vernie, who had recovered somewhat; Billee turned back once more to see what she might and report it to the others.

The great fire had slowed upon reaching the river. Cottonwoods and willows had scorched but were steaming more than burning. Horsetails and nettles had merely wilted; but sparks from the timber to the south had showered onto the open field with its dry grasses; and what amounted to a prairie fire was advancing upon the homestead. She ran down the stone steps.

Space among shattered Mason jars and splintered crates had been made for Vernie. Wilson and Errol, breathing heavily, sat at his head and feet, their backs to the pantry shelves. Billee told them what she had seen.

"All to the good," replied Wilson.

"How so?" wheezed Errol, as he dug out a bottle of the slimy but now much-appreciated creek water for Vernie.

"The grass won't be enough fuel to cook us, down here; th' wind will carry th' smoke away from us for a couple of hands yet; and as far as th' Creek's chances go, this valley will hold up things for a day or two. We might make it and th' Creek might make it."

"What if the wind changes and we get smoked out?"

"We might have to bury our faces in some of that dirt over there and breathe through it that till th' smoke lifts. Might not even need to, though."

"When can we leave?" asked Billee.

"No way to know. If th' fire goes down to th' big valley, we might be able to follow it round to Bridge and get home tomorrow. If it goes th' other way, same plan."

"And if it goes both ways?"

"Still same plan. Th' main thing is, we got down out of the woods. No way we were gonna make it up there."

Vernie passed the bottle to Wilson, who took a few swallows and gingerly wiped at his swollen lips. "Bee, ya done good up above Blue Creek. Real good."

If Billee's face had not been as sooty as her hands, he might have noticed her blush.

A slight noise above drew their attention. On the top step stood a singed bobcat. It looked as if it were considered whether to join them in their hideaway.

∴

Lockerby snapped the latch open and swung out the rear door of the LAV. Wolf, with a steel ring round his neck that was chained to the wall, sat up, blinking. He was naked, and sweat gleamed on every part of his body.

Lockerby saluted, sardonically. "Hey, fella; change out yer chamberpot?"

Wolf, who saw no advantage in his first impulse, which would be to throw the bucket's contents over Lockerby, complied. "Where are we?" he croaked.

"Yer parked in th' shade till th' heat lets up some. Everybody's doin' siesta; even th' Riders."

"I c'n hear that. I mean location."

"High ground and gnarly; slow goin'. Found an old signpost for ya." Lockerby took the night soil bucket and set it down, then picked up the sign and showed it to Wolf, whom he knew could read.

"Drain," said Wolf dully.

"Drain what?"

"It was a town. We're close to th' North-Runnin' River now."

"Cool. So how close are we to Eugene?"

"Not so far. Two more ghost towns first. Th' good news is, it opens up more ahead and flattens out th' rest of th' way. Th' bad news is, there'll be more trees 'n such in th' pavement."

"So, long as we don't have any more breakdowns with th' Cat for awhile, what? One day? Two?"

"Two days out."

"Uh huh; and where's that old gun shop you're takin' us to?"

"Bout three, four days past Eugene."

"Anything we should know 'bout Eugene, bud?"

"Naw, it's like Roseburg, grown over, only worse. They was some kind 'o rad-bomb used on it by th' Chinese. Stay to th' right of th' river 'n don't eat th' plants."

Though he was on his guard, Lockerby looked on his old friend with kindness. "You've been a good man, Wolf, an' yer still a good man. I hope we c'n all get past this situation, come a day."

"That'd sure suit me, Locky. Only thing'd beat these chains for comfy'd be no chains, 'n that is a *fact*."

"K, well, gonna leave this door open, give ya air; we'll get rollin' about – " Lockerby held out his hand, fingers together, at arm's length toward the Western horizon, beneath the red and glowering sun. " – two hands."

"Lockie, a question."

"Hmm?"

"Who 'n hell has been drivin' this thing?"

"New kid."

"Uh huh. Could ya teach him a little more about smooth clutching? I don't have much tail bone left."

Lockerby grinned. "I think Mullins will be drivin' this afternoon. You'll be able to catch some shut-eye." He picked up the bucket and walked away in the dim red light.

"Huh." Wolf sipped at the bowl of water Lockerby had also brought. If the evening cooled enough he would try to do some calisthenics; if nothing else, hold a length of chain between his outstretched hands and pull, counting to a hundred. *Got to stay in shape. I ever get the chance, I just might kill ever' one of these sonsabitches with my bare hands.*

∴

Jorj thought that, if he were the swearing kind, he'd swear now. Deerie was not really up to this kind of thing.

"What is the matter, Mr. Jorj?" asked Bolo.

Jorj looked at him. Bolo, the biggest fellow in the tribe, had tremendous strength but was only moderately useful. One had to tell him "Go left" to have him turn right, and use exactly backward hand motions to get him to tie ropes or such. A gentle giant with his brains in backwards.

"We have to pull this tree to get through here, and I'm tired, Deerie's tired, and you don't look so hot yourself." He'd attacked the fir with the dozer blade, skinning the bark away, but it was uphill, and Deerie, a mere three-roller, was not up to it. A foul stench arose from the tractor's ancient joints. *Can't run iron machinery in bear grease, anyhow. The poor thing's dying.* He looked again at the tree, which was already weeping resin from the wound.

"Mr. Jorj, I could use the axe."

Jorj glanced at the trailer, parked a ways back, piled high with smashed two-by-sixes. "Thank you, Mr. Bolo, but that's an all-day proposition. And we've scouted right and left. If we can get through here, we'll be down into that valley of super-heroes of yours before the day gets too hot to drive. Let's go get some more wood first. Then

we'll take this choker and set it around the base of the tree."

The choker was a steel cable, with a loop at one end, a knob at the other, and a sliding hollowed-out iron block on it, known as a "choker bell." After the cable was thrown around a log, tree, or stump, or even a boulder, the knob could be snapped into the bell, and the noose thus formed could be drawn tight by pulling on the loop. Bolo knew enough about the choker to set it properly, but he would have to be talked through the rest of the procedure.

"Now take this and put it on the loop." Bolo grabbed the iron-shanked single-block pulley and climbed up to the tree. "No, no, Mr. Bolo, not the wheel. The top part there – okay, let's call it the bottom part. There's a pin in it. Pull the pin out and and it opens up – like a padlock – and wrap that thing around the end of the loop."

Bolo tried, but Jorj could see that he thought he should try to stuff the entire bight of the loop into the shackle. "Wait, I'm coming up." Jorj climbed down from the torn leatherette seat of the Deere.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Jorj."

"Don't be. You've worked d... – awfully – hard the last couple of days, and all night too." Jorj snapped the shackle onto the choker.

"Where's th' pin?"

"The pin?" Bolo looked chagrined.

They sought for it among the sword ferns and duff for what seemed an eternity, but the pin was no longer a part of their world.

"Never mind. See that hemlock over there, good ways off? Get the other choker, set it there, and come back for th' wire rope."

"Yes, sir."

"No, wait."

Bolo stopped in mid-stride, choker in hand.

"Lessee," said Jorj, speaking mostly to himself. "Tree wants to go straight down hill. So Deerie's gotta go off over here and pull that-away. A little steep. But doable. So, wire rope from drawbar to hemlock, up to th' fir, down to another anchor tree. Deerie heads downhill over here, pulls tree thataway." He focused on Bolo. "K, we're gonna single-block in two places and let's hope th' wire rope will reach that maple over there."

"Yes, sir."

It seemed to Jorj to take forever to lay out the wire rope and the blocks. And the day was already shaping up hot. From time to time he glanced at the chimney pipe and listened to the little engine chuffing away on high idle. Deerie was not efficient in hot weather.

"What about the pin, sir?"

"Bolo, I'm proud of you for remembering that. Good boy." Jorj watched Bolo's face break into a rare, shy smile at the slight praise. "Here's what we do. You got muscle, I got tools." Jorj tipped Deerie's seat forward and extracted a box wrench. "Pull that bolt over there; I

think it might just be the right thread to fit that shackle."

Bolo took the wrench and stared at the bolt head.

"Here; snap it on here like this and then pull the handle towards ya."

"Oh." Bolo pushed.

"No, pull."

"Oh." Bolo pulled. The long-rusted bolt complained loudly, then the bolt head sheared; it and the wrench came away together.

"D... – doggone it, Bolo."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Jorj."

"Not your fault. Next one."

The bolt extracted, they completed their layout. At Jorj's direction, Bolo slid the choker as high on the fir tree as he could reach, then scrambled down the slope and climbed aboard Deerie.

Bolo raised the blade a bit by cranking on the come-along that was hooked to the right front post of the cage, and Jorj tapped the throttle bar several times, trod on the clutch, pushed the gear shift into the lowest gear, and shoved both levers forward. With a lurch that felt frighteningly tippy, Deerie snuffled off along the mountain's slope, gouging away a thin rind of dirt and brush with the lower right corner of the blade. The wire rope lifted itself from the forest floor, carrying fern fronds and dirt. It pulled taut, singing.

All three trees shivered. Deerie's tracks chewed up duff, then hit mineral soil and dug in. The little tractor began to slip downhill. Five more feet to the left, and they would be entangled with the wood trailer.

Bolo leaned out as far to the right as he could, as if to try to keep Deerie upright with his own center of gravity.

Jorj reached over and tugged him back onto the seat. "That wire rope is bad frayed, Bolo; if you are out there when it parts, it can whip you to pieces."

Deerie lurched forward again, and Jorj, looking over his shoulder through the diamond mesh of the steel cage, could see that the wire rope had sagged again among the ferns.

"We got 'er, we got 'er!" he sang out.

Bolo began to climb down from the seat for a better view.

"No, no, stay here! Stay in th' cage!"

Bolo complied.

The fir tree moaned as it leaned downhill, following the insistent tug of the cables. The massive fan of roots on the tree's uphill side rose into the air, carrying a portion of the forest floor, ferns and all, with them. The roots moved slowly and majestically, but the treetop swung quickly through the canopy of the forest, snapping off its own and other trees' branches as it went, flinging them far and wide. One of these landed on Deerie's roof and skittered across it, to land on the

engine cover. The ground shook beneath the tractor as the tree struck the earth, covering Deerie's tracks where she had come up the trail earlier in the day.

Jorj grinned at Bolo. "Good one, huh?"

"Mr. Jorj, I have never seen such."

"Well, we never had to do it before. Lord be praised, it worked out. Let's get that mess off th' hood and stoke the fuel pot. Then we'll pick up all our d... – our toys and be on our way." He pulled back on the levers, grinning.

∴

Ellen Murchison leaned on her walking stick and raised the binoculars to her eyes with her free hand. As she scanned the gathering smoke cloud behind Ridge, she thought of the strange, sad battle in the night, in this very spot, that had broken her health.

She'd had a relatively small wound. Back in the day, it would not have gotten her much of a triage ticket. Young Huskey had saved her, hammering that stranger's skull in with a hatchet, but the damage was done. No, not really. It was the cold rain, afterward; stumbling down a mountain in the dark for hours is not really suitable for women – or men, she thought wryly – in their sixties. It's not for anybody. *Not to take anything away from poor Marcee*, she thought. *But we really don't have medicine any more. We barely even have soap.* She wrinkled her nose as she became aware, once again, of her own body odor. At least, with the new no-hair hairdo, she didn't have to smell her own unwashed head.

"I want to thank you again for bringing me up here," she said to the young man standing beside her, without taking her eyes from the glasses. "It's been a while."

"Thank you, ma'am, it was not a problem."

Neel Perkins would not have been counted a man in her generation, she realized. He would be – what? A 'seventh grader', with four or five years of childhood remaining to him. Yet here he was, standing with his hand resting easily on the pommel of his sword. He and Elberd, the youth whose face Elsa and Karen had sewn up the day after that battle, had brought her to Ball Butte, sometimes drawing her in a garden cart, sometimes offering a steadying hand as she staggered forward along the steepening trail. It had been a long journey, begun by the thin light of a faint moon, – and ending in what would surely have been a blistering sunrise but for the everlasting smoke. It was exhausting, and not a little dangerous, to climb the Butte under these conditions; a shift in the smoke could smother their position and make much too much work for her fragile lungs. But no other position in the region offered such a commanding view of the surroundings, and,

besides, the lookout had a working telephone.

The youth broke into her reverie. "Stinks, doesn't it?"

She smiled. "Me, you, or both?"

Oh, not us, ma'am; the fires. It's like burning a pile of leaves, but something else, too."

"You're right. Leaves have a kind of clean smell. Or so we tend to think. This is leaves and such, but also duff, moss, lichens – bugs, animals, feathers, creek beds – *dirt*. It's the *earth* burning; that's what you smell. Other things, too. There was a lot of plastic left lying about, Before."

"Why is there so much fire, ma'am?"

"Well, the world's a hotter place than it once was. Not all the time; you might be old enough to remember the Big Winter – "

"Yes, ma'am. Kinda."

"– but, anyway, now we get more record highs, as they used to say, than record lows. When a big high – unusual hot weather – comes in summer, or even spring or fall, it dries out everything. Dry stuff, you know, burns better than wet stuff. Trees are wet inside; they are a kind of standing water tank, really. But they can dry out, too, if things go like this long enough. And about half the forests around here are dead wood, too, from bark beetles, which have taken over because of the – usually – warmer winters. Dead trees make *really* good fuel."

"What made the world warmer?"

She lowered the binoculars and looked at him. *This is a smart kid. He asks good leading questions.* "Well, you've farmed at Tomlinson's. Did you work with the cold frames?"

"The window boxes along the south slope? Yes, ma'am."

"How do they work?"

"Dad says the sunlight comes in through the glass but not all of it comes back out, so it heats up the air and stuff inside."

Ellen smiled grimly. "Mm-hmm, same thing. Air is like glass, in its way. Visible light goes in through the glass, but infrared, which is a part of light you can't see – without help – can't all come back out with the rest. So it gets converted into heat, locally. They found out, many years ago, that some gases in the air act more like glass than others. There's more of these gases in the air than there used to be, so the sun heats us up more than it used to."

"If you say so, ma'am. But why would there be more 'gases' now than then?"

"Ever heard of coal, oil? Methane?"

"Oil, yes ma'am. If you mean like 'gasoleen'?"

"Very good! Out there on that highway, and all around the Creek, you've seen machinery that's not going anywhere. Cars, trucks, buses, tractors, lawnmowers. To use them, we burned oil – which we got from underground, where it didn't off-gas much. Burn oil, or coal, or

methane, and you add heat-trapping gases to the air we breathe. The air everything depends on."

"Doesn't the forest fire do that?"

"Well! Keep it up and Dr. Savage will grab you and make a scientist of you."

"She's already interested in my sister. I'd rather be a soldier."

"Hmh. Well, yes, fire puts the stuff – most of it used to be called carbon dioxide – in the air, but it's nowadays mostly from wood, which took it out of the air. So that was a kind of a circle of stuff. When you get it from underground you add in more than can be circulated."

"But, ma'am, isn't the world a big place? How could we do all this ourselves?"

"There used to be a lot more of us than there are now, young man. I'd be surprised if there are more than ten thousand people in the whole of Oregon, as this area used to be called, and I remember when there were close to five million. Those machines out there, on the freeway?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"In my world, my world that *died*, there were more than a *billion* of those. Each one doing more to the air than the kitchen chimney at Tomlinson's. Along with locomotives, airplanes, ships, buildings, you name it, we had it. And the breathable air over the whole planet, really, is only about four thousand meters deep."

Neel was not sure of the meaning of half her words, but he'd learned to let most of that slide. "Why'd we do it, then?"

"Everyone wanted to live comfortably, Mr. Neel. *Everyone* wanted to live comfortably. Do you see the old yellow bus at Mary's?"

"At 'New Ames'? Yes, ma'am, I can see it from here."

"That thing had a two-hundred-and-eighty horsepower engine. That means it could do the work of, I think, a little over two thousand humans. Ever heard of slavery?" His deep brown eyes met hers. *A man's gaze.*

"Yes, ma'am. My mom tells me most of my ancestors were slaves."

"Well, there you go. Getting thirty kids to school five days a week was the equivalent of eighty thousand slave-hours of work. And that was only one of a billion such machines. And that's why the world is on fire today."

She handed Neel the binoculars. The distant Cascades could not be seen at all, but Ridge, Maggie's Hill, the Great Valley, and the Creek were all visible from here, though smudged. Because Ridge and the Butte both swung in toward the Creek near Bridge, they could see all the way to Old Ames up Starvation Creek. "Tell me what your young eyes see."

"Nothing much doing at Ridge. It looks different to me than a few

days ago, though."

"They have been cutting trees to get fuel away from the Door."

"Oh." He swung round to his left. "There's someone heading for Bridge. On a horse!"

"Which way?"

"Oh, sorry! Going out."

"Whew. Alone?"

"Mm-hmm, I mean, yes, ma'am – no, wait. There's an animal walking beside the horse."

"That would be Krall, a dog from Roundhouse. So that's Tomma, who's been turned loose to look for the Wilson crew."

"Yes, ma'am, it's him. I think. Things are kinda doubled up in this thing."

"It got whacked once. Cross your eyes a little. How does the Valley look?"

"Same as ever. There's not so much smoke that way, and I can see the big mountain pretty good."

"Mary's Peak. Can you see the freeway?"

"The Highway of Death? No, ma'am, the trees have dropped a lot of leaves, but it's pretty thick woods down there."

"Nothing burning?"

"Not yet, anyway."

"How are we to the east?"

He crossed the room. "I can see some men and women swinging tools down there; like they are building a road."

"Fire trail. At Schneider's?"

"No, not across from our old place. Gulick's, already."

"Already, you say; but that is terribly slow. With tractors, it would be very different. We could really use that oil right now."

He lowered the binoculars and raised his eyebrows.

She couldn't help but laugh. "See, that's how it always was. The stuff was killing us, but we couldn't do without. Still don't really have any good alternatives; that's why we're all hungry."

"Yes, ma'am." He renewed his watch. "There are two cows at Peacher's. And ... and some wolves or 'yotes are standing there looking at them."

"Damn. Not much we can do for them at this point."

The boy glassed up Maggie's Hill. "Funny."

"What's that?"

"A big tree in the north saddle just fell over all by itself."

"What? Where? Let me see that." She almost snatched the binoculars from Neel's hands.

"Right in the low spot."

Ellen peered through the lenses for a long moment. A thin blue vapor rose from the saddle – no, a pulsing smoke that did not look like

wildfire. She'd swear it was from a machine! It would have to be the wood-gas tractor she'd heard about. *About time we had some good news around here.*

...

Billee opened her eyes. Some movement had wakened her. She looked up the staircase, blinking. The hindquarters and short tail of the bobcat were just disappearing. It had stayed the night, then. She was pleased.

She looked up at the open sky, or what she could see of it, between two blackened floor joists that stretched across the spacious cellar. Clouds of smoke still drifted by, but they did not have the hellish pink glow she'd seen when she awakened in the night. Also, there was no sound. In the night the dried grasses of the fields around Lawson's had burned, crackling like thousands of dried seed pots being trampled under the feet of a multitude.

She wanted to stretch, but realized Wilson was still asleep. She discovered that her head was on his shoulder, and his arm was draped across her. Stiff as she was, she thought she might as well savor the moment. She listened to his heart's slow and steady beat. As she did so, she let her gaze fall on Vernie, to find that he, and also Errol, were smiling at her. She smiled shyly in return.

We would have died anywhere but here, she thought. If you're going to show you have feelings, the day after a night like that will do. Betcha.

...

Karen felt guilty leaving all the pipette work to Deela, but Dr. Mary had been clear on the potential exposures for the baby, and Karen knew she was right. She contented herself with supervising the armory, work she had inherited from Wilson. Ceel Perkins had shown an interest in Ridge matters and Karen had roped her into inventorying, cleaning and lubricating firearms as well as maintaining the "surplus" bows, arrows, crossbows, bolts and, now, spears.

"What will we do with the spears, ma'am?" asked Ceel. "They don't seem much use against things like these." She waved her hand at the twenty-two rifles stacked along the opposite wall.

Karen was still unused to the title of "ma'am" and her expression said so, but Ceel missed it. "The thought is that *'idle hands undo Jeeah's work,'*" Karen replied, hefting one. "We haves lathes, and grinders, and metal, and people will be cooped up together underground next winter. So we've made these prototypes against that time, though most everyone's busy outside right now. We'll make more of them then, and if we ever run out of ammunition and face a foe that has done the same, we'll have these ready to hand." Karen

leaned the spear, a sturdy leaf-bladed design of Errol's with a slender ash shaft, against the wall. She moved on to the twenty-twos. "So we've scoured the whole valley, and what do we have now?"

"There are eighteen of these, mostly bolt action or sem-something –"

"Semi-auto."

" – uh-huh, that. Either with the tubes –"

"Tubular magazine."

" – mm-hmm, or the box things."

"Box ..."

"Umm, magazine?"

"Very good. Single-shots will be the most reliable at first."

"Seven of them, ma'am."

"It's a start. And over here?"

"We found twenty-four 'shotguns.' They are single-shot, pump, also one bolt action and one lever action."

"Lever actions for this ammunition were rare. A twelve?"

"Yes, ma'am, and most are, though one of them has this on it?" Ceel handed Karen a scrap of paper with a childish drawing of the number '28.'

Karen recognized the rising inflection at the end of Ceel's sentence as a sound she'd heard only at the Creek. She and Marcee had discussed it, as she'd noticed Marcee doing it when talking with Dr. Tom. They had decided it was a status marker; a girl apparently must question her own perceptions or information so that it might be validated by the person spoken to: any woman in authority or pretty much any man. Karen knew that some men found her lacking in some way without seeming to know exactly what was bothering them; and she knew that the cause was they were subconsciously listening for, and not hearing, deference. She would have to train Ceel out of it, and any other girl she could get hold of; else the Creek could become an all-male club like that of the old world. But, maybe, one thing at a time. First try to make sure there'd *be* a Creek down the line. "Twenty-eight gauge, yes. We'll put that one aside for the duration, I think. We could at least use the stock, or maybe convert it to a percussion muzzle-loader. Do you read and write?"

"Dad would like to teach us; but we're all busy all the time," Ceel said shyly.

"We'll try to pick up the pace on that this winter. So, how many sixteens?"

"One."

"Good, set it aside for now, too. Are there shells for it?"

"Yes, but only one box."

"They'll be worth it at some point. Twenties?"

"Eight. And about ten boxes of shells for them, different kinds. Lots

of kroz-shun."

"Corrosion, yes. I'm not too worried. You'd like a twenty; plenty of punch but doesn't bruise your shoulder. So, fourteen twelves. I hoped there would be more twelves."

"I heard there were some packed away at Wilson's. All the fourteens were there, too. Somebody was going to try to do something with them."

"Fourteens? Oh, four-tens. Are there shells in that size?"

"Nine boxes."

"Drat. Well, anyway, we will have to learn to load for these things. I think we'll have to use fulminate of mercury for the primers; it's going to be tricky. But we need it for the black powder weapons already in use; we're almost out of percussion caps. If we can make enough for the four-tens as well, perhaps they'll be useful as mines or trip-wire traps or something. Or find something to use as slugs."

"I'm not sure I followed all that, ma'am."

"Love that honesty; you'll 'go far'. I was talking about two things at once." Karen mused for a moment. "Farmers, being a conservative lot, would not all have traded in all their old thermometers for the newer kinds; go down to the Savage Mary's stores and see if you can find any. And ask Deela or Mary if there are any other sources."

"Yes, ma'am." Ceel turned on her heel, skipped away three steps and then swung around.

"What do thurmeters look like?"

"Oh, They'll know."

"K." Ceel nearly collided with Billee in the doorway. "Woops."

"Woops y'self," returned Billee amiably.

"Billee!" Karen whooped.

"What's up?" Billee leaned her rifle and bow against the wall and shucked her quiver and fanny pack.

"You're alive; that's what. And the others?" Karen knew the news must be good; Billee would be drooping in every feather if it were not.

"We holed up at Lawson's. Wilson thought of that. It burned around us late at night and we all got owies from sparks but that was all. Oh, and Vernie is pretty beat, but Krall found us and she had Tomma with her and we brought Vernie in on the horse. Oh, and a bobcat spent the whole night with us!"

"A bobcat?"

"It slept at the top of the cellar steps. Oh, and I think I'm gonna get married."

"Hah. I told you he's just slow."

"They're *all* slow."

"It seems like that to us around here, but, you know, people used to not get married till they were in their twenties or even their thirties."

"Whoa, *old*. Who would marry in their *thirties*? With their whole

life behind them. Wilson's kinda an old maid himself as it is. Oh, and do ya want your monocular back?"

Karen turned and dropped the scrap of paper on the Armory desk, smiling to herself. "No, you should keep it. You get out a *lot* more than I do."

"Sorry 'bout that. The last coupla days, though, I think some of us got out a little more than was good for us."

Karen looked back. "You know, if we had lost you guys, I dunno, the Creek might have just folded its tents and slunk away."

"Funny talk, but I think I know whatcha mean. Anything need doin'?"

"Sure; the 'chamberpots' in here are overflowing and have to get to the garderobe pronto. Things stink more with the air filters clogging up so much. Won't you take two buckets, and I'll take one."

The pots, gallon-sized galvanized pails with lids, stood in the darkened barracks between the Armory and the Infirmary. They could hear Marcee on the job next door: "Stay off this for a few days and you'll be ... "

Returning to the bright lights in the small Armory, they blinked and started forward with their buckets.

Karen set hers down suddenly in the middle of the floor. "Billee, your butt-pack's been moved?" It was at least six inches nearer the door than she remembered seeing it set down.

"It has!"

Billee set down her buckets and both women ran for the door. Billee sprinted to the right and Karen to the left. There were doors at each end of the hallway, with stairwells behind them. In a few moments, Karen, who had found an empty stairwell, re-entered the hallway, to find Billee doing the same. Karen gestured, palm up. Billee shook her head. Karen pointed to the doors nearest her, and Billee nodded her comprehension. They worked towards each other, looking into each compartment as they went. Karen came to the first on her right, which was open. Avery Murchison looked up from his desk, where he was poring over inventories, brows furrowed.

"Did anyone run by here?" she asked.

"Only you, just now." His expressive brows shifted to interrogative.

"I'll be back." She moved to the Infirmary. Marcee stood beside the examination table, on which sat Vernie. Tomma occupied a chair near the wall, holding a pair of crutches. At his feet sat Krall. They all looked blankly at Karen, except Krall, who stood up and barked once. What was that, some kind of greeting?

"Hello, Vernie, welcome home. Did anyone come through here?" Karen directed her question to Marcee.

"No-o-o, don't think so."

"Great. Vernie, can we borrow Tomma?"

Vernie nodded, a bit morosely.

"Sure thing, Karen," said Tomma, setting aside the crutches and standing up.

The two of them stepped into the hall, with the big dog at Tomma's heels.

"What do you have in mind?" asked Tomma.

"Don't know yet. Here comes Billee."

"Nothing?" asked Karen.

"Nobody." Billee was holding her fanny pack in one hand, and something clenched in the other. "They were fast."

"Who?" asked Tomma.

"That's what we'd like to know," replied Karen. "We had our backs turned for like five seconds and Billee's bag moved toward the door."

"In the Armory?"

"Anything missing?"

"I'm not sure," said Billee, tears in her eyes. She held out her hand; it gleamed with copper and brass. "I checked out twenty rounds; now I have nineteen. But I ran and fell down and ran for, like two days and a night. I *could* have lost one."

Tomma put his hand on her shoulder. "Do you really believe that?" he smiled.

"No."

Avery rolled up to them in his chair. Karen opened her mouth, but he raised his hand. "I got the gist. Who do we actually know of that was last in the hall?"

Karen was aghast. "Ceel," she said reluctantly.

"Then we'll find her immediately. No, Karen, don't be so miserable; I don't suspect her either. But we *must* eliminate her as a possibility if we can, as well as get her report of anything she might have seen. I'll stay here and lock the Armory from both ends. We've had a failure of operational security." He looked again at Karen. "Not your fault. It's seldom *been* locked. Along with any other room down here, except the power room, of course. My bad; after that odd business at the festival I should have known better. Now, hop!"

Karen went left. Billee, Tomma and the dog went right, to descend the stairwells to the Common Room. As they reached the doors, Karen could hear Billee's voice, which carried the length of the corridor: "So, how come *you* get a dog?"

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On the fire line, a weary cheer went up as the strange little machine crossed a slimy stretch of the Creek and chugged up to them. Bolo, though he had not slept in two days, jumped down from the seat and unhooked the trailer. A man from Roundhouse gave him the tribal

salute, right hands grasping right forearms, then led Deerie, with a bleary-eyed Jorj at the controls, toward the head of the line. A small, powerfully built man leaped over the rolling tracks onto the vacant side of the Cat seat and settled beside him. "It is amazing and gratifying that you are here."

"Thank you, sir," Jorj croaked. "Water?"

The man, who seemed to be the one in charge, crooked his finger at a younger man who looked very much like him – his son? – and made the universal drinking sign, thumb to his lips and small finger extended. The youth unshipped a damp-looking skin bag from his shoulder and handed it into the cage.

"Drink well, there is much. My name is Emilio. What we are doing is to make a fire lane around the fields on both sides of the valley. Then, if there had been time, to make one around Ridge. But there is already fire on the mountain."

They both looked toward Starvation Ridge, which loomed above them. Smoke boiled up from the unseen slopes of the south side and disappeared into the brown pall that covered the sky.

"Not much steam in that d- ... that smoke," observed Jorj.

"It is mostly poison oak and other scrub that is burning there," agreed Emilio. "It will reach the crest in a hand or less." Emilio extended his hand, fingers together at a right angle to his arm, toward the presumed location of the sun.

"And throw sparks into the tall stuff on this side. Pretty dry up there?"

"Yes, five percent moisture even in the shade."

"Okay, there's no saving it. Y'gonna backfire?"

"As soon as possible."

"Okay. Deerie here is old and cranky but game, I think, and she's hungry. Can we have firewood – lots of firewood – chunked small, if we can get it?" Jorj released the levers for a moment and gestured with his hands held about six inches apart.

"We will do that."

"Great. Pleased to meet ya."

But Emilio had already leaped away to confer with the younger man. The Roundhouseman climbed aboard. "The Lord greet you, Jorj."

"The Lord greet you. Where to?"

"The line is up to the next farm on the right. We have four farms to go on this side of the valley. You can see they each have a cluster of buildings. We have cut through all the fences for you, and it is a matter of having clean dirt, six feet wide."

"We're here. I'll make a shallow Cat road; ask folks to clean burnables out of the berms and roadbed as best they can. Crank down the hoist for me and we'll start pushing."

"Yes, Jorj."

Men, and several women, with axes, were widening a gap in a hedge for the lane. They scrambled aside as Deerie's blade bit the earth, tearing away blackberries and hawthorns with startling ease. Another cheer went up. Two lines of firefighters formed up behind the tractor, and as Deerie forged ahead along the fields on the other side, the people chopped and scooped away duff and brush with axes, adzes, picks, shovels, rakes, and hayforks. Whenever Deerie moved up a few feet, the people did likewise, leaving whatever they'd been doing for the next person to finish.

Those who had exhausted themselves earlier in the day sat in shade, drinking water, talking quietly among themselves.

Emilio dispatched Raoul for the fuel wood, and then walked over to the resting group. "It is better in the shade, even with these evil clouds, yes?"

Heads nodded. Among them was David, Raoul's brother. "Sir, it would be too hot to work at all in full sun."

"Yes; the fire is terrible and the smoke, if it ran low, could not well be breathed. And yet it offers us some respite. So it is with everything. Even a great terror may have something to offer." Emilio looked up at the big hill. "When the fire comes across, it will draw up this lovely air toward itself. Then we will make fire here. We have piled brush at each farm. Let us have torchbearers go to each station." He pointed to each of them in turn. You will go to Bridge. You, Hall. Bledsoe, Russell, Wendler. Schnieder, Gulick, Hisey. I will fire the pile here at Peacher's. The signal will be three shots from Ball Butte."

"Mr. Emilio?" It was a young shepherd from Beeman's. "What about Reymer's? And Ellin's and Holyrood's – and Wilson's?"

Emilio shook his head. "Ah, there it is. The fire is very big, and we are few."

:::

Young Neel, almost reluctantly, handed the binoculars back to Ellen. "Those are so nice."

"They'd be even better with straight prisms." She brought the eyepieces up and scanned Ridge. No flames yet; just the eternal smoke, rising, rising. "These things will become harder and harder to find as time goes by. There were many houses – whole towns – that will have vanished in this fire, and in others like it. Places we at the Creek never had the time to explore and utilize. Any binoculars that remained in those closets and cabinets are gone forever, and who knows when we will make such things again?" She lowered the little device, examined it ruefully, and smiled at Neel. "This is a 'cheap' model, too, a brand I would never have considered owning, once upon a time. Now they're priceless. Never drop them. Come to think of it,

never drop anything. It all represents a fading past, but possibly also, a future. Such things, if we can hand them on in some way, could serve as models to guide a people to make new ones. Someday."

Ellen raised the glasses again and swept Ridge. There! A tongue of flame in the Saddle. *Oh-h, not good*. She could see that the fire crews were only two-thirds of the way there. If the fire advanced at the east end first, it could race down to the forests beyond Old Ames and flank everyone. There! More! Tall fir trees near the crest of Ridge began weaving back and forth in the winds the flames were creating. One tree burst into a dull orange fireball, showering burning twigs into the dark growth on the near slope.

She turned and looked around the room. Elberd, undoubtedly very tired, had taken the opportunity to stretch himself out on the stone shelf that had sometimes served as a bunk bed, and, nodding off to the droning of Ellen's climate lecture, had fallen fast asleep. She stepped across and gently shook his shoulder. He sat up, almost bumping his head on the basalt ceiling, and blinked at her sheepishly.

Ellen drew her Navy revolver – when did it get so heavy? – and held it up, handle forward, by the long barrel. "Young man, would you like to go out and fire this thing three times for me?"

"Me, ma'am?"

"You. I'm going to be on the horn to Ridge to shut down their ventilation, if they haven't already. It's getting nasty over there."

∴

Along two miles of valley floor, at the angle of repose between farms and Ridge, men and women waited; when the three shots rang out, they bent to their tasks. Emilio knelt, shielding his work out of habit, though there was little wind as yet. He would prefer to use his hand lens, but thick, gritty brown clouds hung between him and the sun; he extracted a match from a grease-coated packet in his sweaty tunic and struck it on a handy river-rounded stone. It hissed and produced a faint uric-acid whiff. He reached the tiny flame through a gap in the dry, sharp-spined pile of splintered blackberry canes, to hold it beneath an abandoned junco's nest that had been found and placed for tinder, with a ball of dry grass. The tinder barely steamed, but began to produce a hot blue smoke, and the searing heat of an almost invisible flame forced him to retract his hand precipitately, catching himself among the blackberries. The pile seemed to cling to him as it caught alight, and by the time he stood clear, watching the flames shoot up to his own height, he had thoroughly scratched both his arms in his efforts to escape. *That was not pretty*, he thought. *But it is sufficient*.

As his own station was in the angle of the line, he had a commanding view. Emilio stepped back across the fresh track of the

fire road, sipped water, and looked to his left and right, to see smokes rising all along the edge of the woods. Some had had trouble getting theirs started, and he could see the torchbearer racing to their assistance. Before long, all were able to cross the fire trail, take up their tools, and wait.

The fires licked at the forest edge, tentatively crept about among the dry ferns and nettles, and discovered the drought-wasted blackberry and vinca patches. Here and there a hazel flared like a Roman candle, its browned leaves blackening and detaching themselves from the slender, already-burning suckers to drift, by ones, two, and fives, into the lower branches of the firs. As the firs and maples caught fire, everyone was forced to step back into the fields. The hot wind began, tentatively at first, then increased.

The young man from Beeman's –what was his name? – came over from Emilio's left. "What now?"

"It is as Doctor Mary told us. We will each watch for sparks or flaming twigs to cross the line and make trouble. The we beat them out or bury them with our shovels and hoes. If this monster comes between us and the Creek, we may lose everything."

∴

"What have you got?" asked Karen, who was tired and out of breath. Running up and down staircases playing detective did not well suit her new size and shape.

Billee shook her head. "Everyone seems to have an alibi; at least to the extent that we could find out without being alarming." She rested her hand on the thick fur of the dog's neck. Krall looked up into her face sympathetically and swept her tail twice.

Tomma knit his brows, an almost comically unusual expression for him. "Weren't we going to be handing those out to all and sundry, sometime soon? Why would anyone *steal* one?"

Karen led the way to the Armory door. Avery sat before it in his chair, looking pensive as he had shifted his weight onto his left hip and rested his chin on his left palm, watching them.

"No news, I can see," he said. "Wouldn't expect it. This was possibly an opportunistic event, entirely unplanned; but it seems enterprising and goal-oriented. We should –"

Minnie Min, a long-time Ridge woman, appeared at the stairwell door, and came running toward them. "Beg pardon, sir, call from Ball Butte that they have lit the backfires below and the big fire is on us. I shut off the vents as directed."

"Well, that *was* the right thing to do," replied Avery, dropping his hand onto the chair's armrest. "The smoke would be bad for us in here in two ways, one of which is all the radiation it will pick up from the

forests. Who was doing this *directing*, though?"

"Sergeant Murchison, sir," she grinned.

"What the hell is she doing up *there*? Old busy-body. Oh, well. Is anyone at Hall, then?"

"No, sir, it's abandoned in case the backfire jumps the line. We're all either here, on the line, or at the Butte. Oh, but we did get a call from there, from David Molinero, that I didn't quite understand."

"Spit."

"The Johnny-popper's here and cutting dirt up pretty good."

"Oh, that would be the tractor from Roundhouse. Thanks, Min; is anyone upstairs now?"

"Umm, no, sir."

"Tell you what; you've had a long shift. Tomma, I see your partner-in-crime is looking round the infirmary door at us; won't you help him down to the Common Room. Min and I'll join you, to sniff things out among the folks there. We'll all take the elevator. Bee and Karen, take over from Min?"

"Sure, we'll do that," said Billee. "Tomma, can I borrow your friend?" Krall seemed to know this last was about her, and her tail swept the air again, cheerfully.

"Traitor. Yeah, do that. Got a worn-out spouse to attend to right now, anyway." Tomma winked.

"Let's get your stuff," said Karen to Billee. Karen, who wore a key on a thong round her neck, unlocked the Armory, flicked on the light, and reached for the rifle; Billee fetched her fanny pack and bow and quiver. Locking up, they trooped, Krall at their heels, toward the lit stairwell.

On their arrival in the old DARPA control room, they found a disconsolate Selk, poking about in the guts of a junction box.

"What's the face?" asked Billee.

He picked up his glasses and peered at them through the thick lenses. "Hi, Bee. Karen. Mary has me trying to push some two-twenty out to the farms, to pump water next summer."

"Well, that's what needs doing."

"Yeah, I get it, but my heart's not in it – I want to be figuring out this stuff over here." He waved his screwdriver at the control console.

Karen leaned the rifle against the wall and eased her awkward shape into the nearest chair. "You know that satellite's only going to want an encrypted signal, Mr. Selk. What are our chances of producing one, without computers?"

"The system *was* computer dependent, yes. But this layout looks like a manual backup. That would have had some kind of predetermined handshake built in – in circuits out of reach of solar flares or electromagnetic attack. I *think*, though I'm not trained enough in this esoteric stuff to know, that everything we need is already in

place in the main panel down at the reactor. A lot of wires run from there to the things in the panel here."

"Whatever." Billee moved to the one of the thick quartzite windows that faced south. "How come it's so quiet in here? I mean, other than you?"

"Thanks. Min was in here awhile ago talking about shutting off the air. I guess she's gone and done that."

Karen put her bare foot over the register under the table. "Mmm-hmm, it's off. Lots of smoke incoming; we don't want Ridge to breathe the stuff."

"Oh. Is that what that's about?"

Billee half-turned away from the window. "Yah, come and see."

Karen and Selk rose and joined her. There was not much visibility. Among the boulders nearby, poison oak bushes, a few feet high, were rattling and twisting in a fierce wind. Beyond them was a wall of brown smog in which dull red sparks rose and vanished, to be replaced by others. One of the bushes caught fire, spectacularly but briefly. And then another. Karen walked round the room. In the west window there was not much to be seen, though the outlines of the north-slope fir woods appeared momentarily. At the north window, however, a drama was unfolding. "Come look."

Billee and Selk walked round as well. The view from this window had changed in the last few days; Dr. Mary had resurrected an ancient electric chainsaw and instructed Armon in its use. He'd become an ardent "faller" as loggers in these parts were once known, dragging a long string of orange drop-cords around from the Ridge entrance and dropping fir trees down the mountain to left and right. The intent was to keep fuel away from the Door and the sally port, more as a precaution than anything, as the doors were thick and remarkably foolproof.

But now events had brought a halt to this new activity. Flames were rushing up through stands farther down the slope, ground fire and crown fire all at once. As each tree was reached, its foliage seemed to explode, a bloom of fire showering petals of flame in all directions, which were then carried up in the wind to new trees above.

Even through the stone walls and thick windows, the young Creekers began to feel the heat. They took an involuntary step backward. Would they be driven downstairs, away from the phone link to Hall and Butte? At that thought, Karen went to the phone and lifted the heavy handset from its cradle. She listened to the silence a moment.

"Does this thing have a 'dial tone'?"

"What's that?" asked Billee.

"Never mind. How do we know if it's working?"

Selk shrugged. "See the doorbell buzzer by the base unit? If you

push that, and somebody answers, it's working."

"Is the line up in the trees?"

"No, buried in the ground."

"C'mere, Krall," Billee called to the dog softly. She put her hand on Krall's head. Krall pressed her side against Billee's knees and thumped her tail.

"Ridge will never be the same after this," said Karen, putting her arm around Billee.

"Nor the Creek neither. Is it all over?"

"Not if we can get those pumps going," said Karen looking over her shoulder at Selk.

Selk turned back to the table. "Yeah, yeah, I hear you. Well, good thing we haven't set up the dish yet, huh?"

...

Raoul, breathless, came running up to Emilio. "Dad, they said tell you fire's ... jumping the line ... toward Holyroods'."

"Thank you; stay and watch the backfire here and I will go."

Emilio ran down the fire line, noting with approval, even as he ran, that most of the backfires had grown together into one wall of flame on the mountain, heading for the Great Fire coming from the other side. To his right, already, there was a blackened wasteland, while to his left, the parched and struggling fields, pastures and hedges remained intact, sloping down to the Creek. Every other fire-setter he rounded up; by the time they reached Holyroods' there were six of them. Here an unmown brown pasture had leaped into flame and was threatening the buildings; rakes, hoes, shovels and wet blankets were flailing. Emilio could hear the sound of the little tractor. "Join the line!" he shouted to the reinforcements. "Fill in between the others so they may spread out farther."

He made for Bolo. Bolo, seeing him coming, waved a long-handled round-pointed shovel in his large fist as if it were a trowel. "Good to see you, sir."

"Where's Jorj?"

"He is cutting road in front of the buildings, by the hedge. The fire moves faster in that direction than along the sides, we think."

"Anyone watching his back?"

"Enok, one of our people."

"Yes, a good man. I worry will that be enough. Is anyone on the other side?"

"No, we are all here. There is no one to fight fire over there. What will you lose?"

"What is left of Wilson's. If it crosses the Creek, Old Ames' and Jones', as well."

"You are sad."

"Those were the places where I farmed. Ames was my home."

Bolo clapped a big hand on the smaller man's shoulder. "All things end, friend. We will do what we can to make less ending, for now."

"Yes. Let us dig."

They dug. As flames raced toward the firefighters through the tall grass, those with blankets beat at them. When the flames hesitated, seemingly seeking a way round the blackened spots left by the blankets, those with shovels threw dirt at them, while those with adzes and grub hoes continued to create new trail.

Across the field, the orchards at Wilsons' could be seen flaming. Nearer at hand, the fire was getting around Jorj and the bulldozer. Emilio agonized over this in his heart, yet he knew little, if anything, could be done. The wars and the diseases had taken their toll. There were simply not enough Creekers, even with these additional men from Roundhouse.

A shout came from those on Emilio's left. Flames had jumped the drought-stricken Creek! Above the steady roar of the burning field, Emilio heard a new sound; the popping and booming sounds a burning building makes. Old Ames for sure; perhaps also Jones. These lands were not currently occupied, but the farms were still in production and the buildings and their contents were irreplaceable.

Surely, with the prevailing wind toward the Great Fire behind them, the destruction could not go in that direction so quickly? But apparently it could. Would it envelop the entire valley, in spite of all they had done for the last eight days?

But, wait! There was more to the shouting. A woman had climbed the lookout at Holyroods', and was pointing toward Beemans' Farm; she was shouting something to Jorj and Enok, who were relaying down the line. Bolo, his face smudged black with soot, stopped shoveling and listened intently; his ears were better than those of any Creeker. He turned to Emilio.

"Roundhouse has come."

"Jeeah is good. Another group?"

"The Lord is good. No, it is everyone. My people have dropped whatever they were carrying and are fighting the fire."

"*Everyone?*"

"Yes. We are all Creekers now."

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Mullins watched the horseman picking his way through the destruction the giant bulldozer had been making beyond the bridge. He had learned to trust Lacey as much as he trusted almost anyone; something in the big rider's dignified demeanor demanded it. Yet he

kept his grip on the riot gun just the same, one hand on the forearm, his trigger finger indexed but close to the trigger guard. He'd learned, through hard experience, to watch everyone for clues – to his future and theirs.

Before Lacey came closer, with his armed slave riding behind him and to his right, Mullins hefted the weapon slightly. "Afternoon, Mr. Lacey, and what have we got?"

The tribal leader reined in and appraised him, standing in the shade by the big LAV. They clearly did not care much for his style, but they had patiently worked with him, and the Volunteers, for weeks. Some of the Volunteers had acted out – yet no Eastsider had risen to the bait; Mullins had been forced to discipline his own troops, whose morale had continued to fade, and Mullins had lost face. These people were something else. He was still not sure what.

Lacey, silhouetted in brilliant sunshine, shaded his eyes and spoke. "There is an abandoned town. Overgrown, like all others. It is as your slave has described it. We have seen the building of which he speaks."

"Aww, Mr. Lacey, he ain't no slave; for one thing, he's too tough to eat." The expression of the Eastsider remained unchanged.

Lockerby, inside the LAV, stood up in the driver's seat and regarded Mullins sourly from across the hull. Even in the shade, heat waves radiated from the whitewashed steel surface. Conditions were not ripe for jibes. "Easy, Mullo."

Mullins tipped his head in acknowledgment. "Yeah, sorry; so, what'd ya see over there?"

"There is a difficulty. The structure is compromised and it is empty."

"Empty?"

"You may go and see for yourself." Lacey spread his arms, hands open, as if to say: *see, if we'd gotten into your precious firearms, would we not now be carrying them?*

Mullins half turned to Lockerby. Almost in a whisper, he asked a time-honored question. "Dubya-tee-eff?"

"Dunno, sir. Mr. Lacey, are there signs of forced entry?"

"Yes."

"And there's nothing inside? How do you know?"

"It has been cleaned to the walls."

Mullins took a step forward.

"You weren't supposed to go inside. I thought we had an agreement."

Lacey held up his left hand, still open, and pointed to it with his right. "To handle some things is not our way. That, we have told you, and we say as we do." He pointed to his eyes. "But we see with our eyes so that we may say what is so."

From within the squad compartment of the LAV, behind Lockerby,

a muffled thumping erupted, followed by a shout.

Lockerby searched the shade. "Kinnet!"

"Lockie!" The man stood up from among his comrades, crossbow in hand.

"Come over here and take over this thing; I gotta run round to the back."

"Lockie."

"That's Lockerby to you. Kinnet."

Kinnet came running.

Lockerby climbed out, hopped onto the front wheel, the rubber of which, he noted sourly, was now covered with incisions and gouges from the long drive. *Will this thing hold up?* The MRAPs had all had trouble, breaking down one after the other, and runners had had to go back in a steady stream to Roseburg for parts and even acetylene tanks.

He jumped down into the soft dirt, spiked with stones, broken roots and branches, that characterized the route of the big Cat, and picked his way round to the back of the armored vehicle. Cautiously, as ever, he turned the handle of the left-hand door and stepped back as he pulled it open. The hammering stopped. "*What, Wolfie?*"

But the chained, naked man, glistening with sweat, was grinning. *How does he stay in such good shape? With no more than we feed him?*

"Shithead."

"Oh, C'mon, Wolfie, I do the best I can. Y'know anythin' ya haven't told us?"

"Nope. Not a bit of it. Came clean to Magee, came clean to y'all. Sounds like we've been pre-empted. Mebbe you'd let me take a *look?*"

"Not sure how we'd manage that, guy."

"Aw, fer cryin' out loud." Wolf pointed to the steel ring round his neck. "Look, is this a good weld or not? Mullins is good with his hands. Just drive me into town, swing the boat around, and lemme see what's up; I might be able to give ya pointers."

"How many guns were in there when you left it, Wolf?"

"Already told ya. I'm as good for my word as yer Eastsiders, Lockie. Anybody took all that stuff, woulda had to bring a lot of transport."

"The hippies?"

"I kinda doubt it. Yer cowboys have been all over this country, any sign of 'em?"

"No, actually."

"Right. They stick close to their hole in th' hills. Lemme see what ya got over there."

Mullins, still facing forward, glanced back along the four tires.

"What's up?"

Lockerby caressed his three-weeks growth of beard absent-mindedly. "Wolf wants to study the scene of the crime."

"Scene of *his* crime, ya think?"

Wolf put on a wounded expression, but something in it seemed genuine to Lockerby. "Nah, I kinda don't think so. I say let's get everybody across this little river and see what the hell happened over there."

Lockerby looked over to Mullins, who shrugged.

"K, that's a plan. We'll camp there tonight."

The small caravan fired up its sooty engines and lifted its weary feet and trundled across yet another of the many stout pre-Undoing bridges it had encountered. These had remained mostly intact, though sometimes their approaches had washed away. The weary Volunteers slouched into the nondescript town, the ruins of which mostly fronted on a single street, filled now with trees and brush except where the D-8 had been. Some of the buildings had been made of brick or cinderblock. Though these now had no roofs, let alone window glass, they offered some hint of protection from surprise or night air, and were quickly invested. Lacey, on his Appaloosa, led the LAV to the fresh new clearing which the D-8's operator had made in front of the ancient gunshop. Kinnet, following Mullins' directions, cut the steering wheel sharply to the right, so that the rear doors of the LAV faced the gap in the concrete wall.

Lockerby, who'd climbed onto the rear of the hull, tapped the surface with a stick. "So, Wolfie, whaddya see?"

"I see shit, shithead, an' it's gettin' dark."

Mullins walked around to the back. "Aw, c'mon, Wolf, this right here was your leverage. And now..."

"...poof. I am well aware of my circumstances, Mullo. I'm lookin'." Wolf surveyed the scene before him with keen interest. He'd gone to a lot of trouble to lock this place down, less than two years ago. The brush and dirt had been removed in the same place he'd gotten in, and the rubble scattered. Once he'd blown his way in, of course, there had only been so much he could do to secure it, but he'd tried, and tried *hard*.

"Dammit. My *stuff*. Oh, well."

He gestured toward a night-blooming jasmine in the rubble-heap on the right. "Pull me up that bush over there."

Mullins' eyebrows shot up. "Huh?"

"Ya want information or don'tcha?"

Lacey, who'd dismounted, came over with his man, to whom he gestured. The Bringer of Food grasped the numerous stems of the shrub in a bundle with both hands and leaned back, bending both legs and straightening them so that the roots came away surprisingly easily.

Wolf peered at the roots, and the stems and leaves as well. "That

was on top of the doorway; it's had a year to re-root, meaning there was rain, likely, when it was moved. Any rain got inside?"

Lacey turned to him, respect in his expression. "We will affirm that it has."

"You cowpokes had a chance to feel out any trails around here, signs of traffic?"

"Tracking is not certain in such a drought as this. But we think no one has been going east and west here for some time. North and south present difficulties."

"Yeah, they do. I got in here from the south myself, with one other guy, and it was hard going. Lemme tell ya. Mullo, I don't think th' farmers did this. The breach is older'n the fight I had with 'em and they ain't armed with anything that coulda come from here."

Lacey nodded his agreement, then, gesturing to his servant to follow, walked away toward the horses.

Mullins looked over at Lockerby. "We'd better get a runner off to th' boss early in th' morning. What you want to bet first thing he'll have us heading back the way we came and over to th' second objective double-time?"

"Nah, Mullo," interposed Wolf affably. "Second thing. Prolly kill me first."

"Why? Don't you think we need you to guide us onto th' weak points?"

"What weak points? It's been almost a year. They've had all this time ta think about th' things *I* tried, and beefed up their defenses. You already know everything I know about 'em, courtesy of your *effin'* doctor, 'an you've gotta outsmart what I know or you'll lose, same as *I* did. So I'm just plain not useful ta have around, now you've looked in this here hole in 'th ground. All that's keepin' me alive right now is how far your runner has ta go to get to Magee an' back again."

"Well, Wolf, let's say *you* know that, say *we* know that, why are you whinin' about it then?"

"Who's whining? Just don't wanna be on, y'know, *pretenses*, so ta speak. So, y'all gonna feed me an' lock me up, or what? Forty-degree diffrence between day 'n night by th' river here."

Lockerby and Mullins, who had been Wolf's friends, were made uncomfortably aware of Wolf's nakedness by this last remark. The lengthening shadows were indeed cool and the steel of the LAV's hull would be sapping heat from his body. Mullins nodded to Lockerby, who stepped forward to within sight of the driver's well. "Kinnet, run back to th' first MRAP and requisition full MREs for yourself and three others."

Mullins called after him. "Lockie and I'll take ours in here. Kinnet." He pointed to the blown doorway.

"Mullins, Lockerby." Kinnet climbed down the hull and ran off.

As they turned to go in, Wolf called to them softly. "Hey guys."

"Mmh?" Mullins turned back toward him.

"Y'all ever think about girls?"

"What?"

Wolf regarded them with amusement. "C'mon, how deep into your heads has Magee got? Alla your men are gettin' antsy. You too, I'm thinkin'. Look, th' farmers is *married*. Th' Eastsiders is *married*. These folks, all around you, some of 'em have *kids*. Of all th' volunteers, who's *married*?"

"Your point?"

"Magee and his doctor. *Married*. Kinda. We, all of us, we got a lot of mileage out of his rules; we're, we were an army and we got our kicks from th' Pilgrim women. But we always hadda kill 'em off. *His* rules. You seen any Pilgrims on this trip?"

They stood looking at him.

"Not even in Eugene. Big town, bigger'n Roseburg, nobody home. *Nothin' ta play with out here*. Guys, I am a dead man talking, but you – you are not going to live forever."

Lockerby caught the corner of Mullins' eye. "Mullo, let's go in."

"Wait a minute. Wolfie, what the hell are you talkin' about; there's women right over there about forty klicks; you said so yourself."

"Yep, and they are th'*only* ones around. And they are *soldiers*, just like us. It ain't trained out of 'em."

"I don't see where you're going with this."

"Here it is, then. Do what you like with me, then go and do what you like with these farmers. If you *can*. Without these guns, *odds are more even than you're gonna like*. But if I might just make a suggestion: *talk* to 'em. They might make ya a better deal than Magee. In the, y'know, long run."

Mullins, suddenly and inexplicably afraid somewhere in his depths, lashed out. "I oughta knock yer face in!"

"Nothin' stoppin ya, is there?"

Mullins stepped forward, and Lockerby interposed himself.

"Careful, Mullo!"

Mullins looked at Lockerby. "Yeah, y'right. Runner first. By th' book."

Lockerby gazed at Wolf, over Mullins' shoulder. "Well, that too. C'mon in."

As they departed, Kinnet arrived and set four MREs on the ground. Two he carried into the shell of the gunshop, then returned. He tore the cover off the third meal, grasped the handle of the right-hand door of the LAV, swung open the door, and, picking up the MRE, dumped its contents on the floor across from the prisoner. He then shut the door, tossed away the empty packet, and, lifting the padlock from the welded-on hasp, prepared to shut the left-hand door and lock Wolf in

for the night.

Wolf extended his foot, which just reached the edge of the outer hull, preventing the door closing.

Kinnet frowned. "Chop that off for you if you like."

"C'mere." Wolf wore a confiding expression Kinnet had not seen from him before, and crooked his finger.

"Not a chance. They said you'd say that. We're closing up for th' night."

"Good boy. But, you know you drive like shit?"

"What?"

Wolf put his hands up as if guiding a steering wheel. Kinnet's eyes followed the motion, and then that of Wolf's left hand reaching for an imagined shifter. Wolf grinned. He had picked up the long and heavy chain as if it were the shifter. Kinnet vaguely realized the end of the slithering chain was somehow not attached to the wall, but before he could either back away or shout, the heavy links had, like a whip, snaked out into the dim light of evening and wrapped round his throat.

"Yeah," said Wolf, matter-of-factly. He stepped silently out onto the cooling earth and held the already dying youth by the chain and the back of his belt, tipping him up so that the thrashing feet could not kick the ground, and walked quietly toward the darkening woods.

"You drive like shit, kid; and I truly do not appreciate being bounced around thataways."

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Mullins poked at the ringbolt with his index finger. "It's got a lot of shine to it – he must have found a way to wear through the last link with sheer friction. Three weeks' work."

Lockerby stood up and looked across the back of the LAV toward the Eastsiders, who were holding some kind of meeting, holding the reins of their horses. "We're screwed, y'know that?"

"Screwed every way I can think of, Lockie. Wolf is at large, and even if *he* didn't move all the goods, he'll have stashed something. The riders look like they're thinking of bolting, and we're not much good without 'em. The trucks are soured, and both the Cat and this too-valuable-for-its-own-good gun platform are gettin' a bit iffy themselves. There's maybe two shipments of stuff comin' up th' road before Magee notices there's no more runners comin', meanin' if we ever see another runner from him, be tellin' us to either commit harakiri or come home an' be shot."

"Shot would be nice, compared to letting the Doctor have us." Lockerby looked at the sun. Its light was already angling down through the trees, which in this valley meant that they'd already wasted a good three hours of daylight. "What have we got in our favor?"

"Well, if we cut ourselves loose – to which I see no alternative – we have here more than half the army Magee could raise against us, and three weeks' head start. Close to parity if we can keep the Eastsiders interested."

"But the machines will run out of fuel by then."

"Yeah, we could circle th' wagons and go on th' defensive, maybe at th' big river. But there wouldn't be enough food and ammunition to hold him off for long, even with this cannon here."

"Here comes Lacey."

The tall Tribal stopped about fifteen feet away. *That's how it's going to be*, thought Lockerby. *Nobody will trust anybody now*. Lockerby made a faint gesture, palm down, for the benefit of the Volunteers: "hold off." If anyone got overeager, Lockerby would have to kill him himself.

Lacey looked them over, his hands on his hips. His men had fanned themselves out, with easy access to the weapons slung on their horses. "You have had a casualty."

"We don't know that," said Mullins. "The prisoner's gone and his guard with him."

"It is a casualty. We have found the body of your guard. He has been stripped of everything he had on him, and he is missing an arm."

"Shit, Wolf's provisioning himself."

"He is practical. A man caught up to him; my Bringer of Food, our best tracker. So we have *our* casualty as well, and we are also missing a horse."

"I'm sorry to hear that. We oughta leave off playing hide-and-seek with him, though. With any luck, he'll go after Magee and leave us to ourselves."

"That may be so. Some of those here wish to return home. We have seen that the machines have liabilities, and that the expedition may be compromised."

"What's your personal take on that?"

The chieftain ticked off three fingers. "I can command only in battle; on the march; or my own kin. As we are encamped, if the Bends wish to go, they may go. I have advised otherwise. Yet there is sense in it. They are few enough that they may subsist on game and may see their homeland again."

"You sound like *you* are thinkin' of stayin'. Yes?"

"When there is no clear way, multiple strategies may lead to at least one acceptable outcome. We Prinevilles live closer to the invasion in the East. We have more at stake here. It may be we may still have the aid of the machines."

"Magee's not likely to keep his end up now."

"We understand that this is so. But perhaps *you* will."

"I hear ya. And I'm glad of it. Tell ya what, I'll make it clear to my

guys in the buildings not to whack your guys, and you ask your guys to back away from those bows a bit with those itchy fingers, and we'll chat some more. You're right; Magee's gonna come after us, and if we've got that power plant and the farmers' food, we have a chance of making something out of this mess."

Lacey nodded. "Yes. Everything must be decided soon. There is little for our animals here, and morale will improve with a march." He walked away.

Mullins turned to Lockerby. "Can you get to that Ay-kay?"

"Yeah, it's in the turret."

"Get in there an' put it just inside the rear doors, chambered and safety off. Unlatch both doors and we'll stay near 'em during this meetin'." Lockerby climbed onto the rear deck of the LAV. "All goes well, won't need it," added Mullins. "We gotta watch *our* guys as well as th' wild 'uns. Gonna make the speech of my life. I'm *hopin'* to start for that valley by mid-day."

Lockerby climbed into the hatch, gingerly; the metal was already absorbing a lot of the sunshine. He looked back. "Do we even know where to go without Wolf?"

"Yeah, some. The Doctor is pretty good at map stuff, y'know. Move it; they're tying up their horses."

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By ox-cart, hauled by the last trained ox, Karen and Marcee made their way down into the scarred and stinking valley of Starvation Creek. As their excuse for the luxurious accommodation, they had volunteered to parcel out water bottles and soup, and Juanita and Guchi had taken them up on it gladly. As they rode along, making stops along the way, they surveyed, with increasing alarm, the destruction that had been visited upon their homeland.

A change in the weather had slowed the rapacious flames at last, and a fire line thrown along Lazar's Creek had held. Lazar's, Reymer's, Ellins', Beeman's, Holyrood's, Jones', Wilson's, and Ames' farms were, for the most part, no more. Houses, barns, fields, orchards, and many of the vital windmills had been swept away. The fire had leaped the north fire road and roared across the east end of Maggie's Hill in the general direction of Roundhouse.

Farmers, trained by Selk in the brute-force mysteries of two-twenty-volt electricity, had salvaged every available form of irrigation equipment not destroyed in the Great Fire. Pipes and hoses radiated by valve and by tee from the five rebuilt pumps Selk had prepared. These, though their intake valves sometimes clogged with algae, sucked at the Creek with a persistent hum new to most Creekers' ears, bringing water to sparse and withered crops on the remaining farms.

Other work parties, made up in large part of people from Roundhouse, were re-planting in burned-over ground from Lazar's eastward. It was very late in the season; but there was some hope of establishing fava beans, collards and kale before winter. Broad swaths of drought-hardened soil, with the ashes of burned oats and barley, had been twice gone over by Deerie. Jorj, the hero of the moment, had clattered everywhere with his wonderful machine in the last two weeks, pulling an antique single-moldboard plow, and then a combination disk and harrow. Old stocks of seed were committed to the dusty seedbeds, and water brought by hand where pipes could not be made to reach.

Still others, newly designated as "smoke jumpers," tracked down blue wisps of acrid fumes at the roots of trees or beneath blackened logs, digging out coals and smothering them in dirt.

Very few people were to be found at Ridge in daylight of late.

The farming was more monocultural than the Creekers liked, with so much organic matter gone up in smoke. They worried about soil loss come winter rain, but there was nothing for it but to plow on the contour, east and west, and hope. Deerie had prepared almost a hundred acres when there had been an ominous bang beneath the tractor's engine cover and the celebrated machine had stopped in its tracks.

Raoul Molinero, his close-cropped mustache now complemented by a shadow of beard, met Karen and Marcee on the Creek road at the edge of the burn. "A sight for sore eyes"; we are all tired of chewing venison leathers and of course everyone is thirsty. The Creek is poisonous for the foreseeable future."

Karen looked at the Creek, trickling between two scorched cottonwoods. Yes, that scum on the pools looked like blue-green algae. And very thick.

"We're happy to be able to help," said Marcee. Standing up in the alarmingly tilted cart, she could see Deerie in the middle distance, with her engine cover raised. No smoke was coming from the woodburning cylinders on the platform at her back; Jorj and Deela could be seen laboring at something in the front, while Doctor Mary, with an umbrella fixed to her wheelchair for shade, kibitzed. "Do we know what happened to the poor Johnny-popper?"

"I'm told there's a 'mangled cylinder sleeve,' whatever that is. It does sound serious. We are going to need your bullock, very likely, after we send you and Dr. Mary back in the cart."

Karen, also standing, swept her eyes over the scene. "We could send him right back down, but he'll need some fodder, water and rest, after the climb. It could be dark by then; could he come down with your breakfast, and help out tomorrow?"

"Anything will be help at this point. Some of us have been spading

and hoeing. It's very slow."

Karen, having turned sod by hand – it seemed so long ago – for an old woman in exchange for a winter's shelter, nodded. "Here's five gallons of soup – it's mostly sunchokes, reconstituted turnip greens and comfrey, with some fish stock – and clean water, fifteen gallons."

"It will be welcome. We like anything at this point. And fish! Where did you get fish?"

"We checked the pools over at Lawson's; a lot of them were trapped there by the drought. They're not very *nice* fish but we found them safe to eat ... we've boiled them in sacks until the bones were softened, then strained out the fins and gills and such. We're drying all the ones we didn't use."

"Sounds great. No, *really*."

A very tanned black-haired girl whom Karen and Marcee hadn't seen before walked up. Her hair hung down in amazingly long braids, double-wrapped in beaded leather thongs. Hair! One of the new people, none of whom had yet given in to the Creek's lice-avoidance protocol. Karen could see from the way she and Raoul smiled at each other that a Roundhouse/Creek romance was under way. She hoped something of the same sort might be happening for David, Raoul's twin.

"This is Nine-ah," said Raoul as he gripped the handle of the soup bucket. "Everyone up-valley will come for their share here; want to sit in the shade a bit?"

"Yes, please," said Marcee. Approaching full term, she was expecting her child some time in the next month; the sun was a discomfort to her even in her white robe and wide straw hat. Raoul and Nine-ah set the heavy pot on a stump and returned to offer the top-heavy women a hand down. Karen gave a long-handled ladle to Nine-ah. "There are some old plastic bowls and tumblers here; Marcee recommends everyone use those instead of just handing the ladle around."

"Oh, *germs*. I've heard about those." Nine-ah laughed. A tinkling sound, though she certainly looked like she could take care of herself.

As Marcee and then Karen made for the weak shade of a drought-blasted apple tree, a group of workers appeared from near the half-burned barn at Lazar's. As they neared, Karen could see Wilson Wilson among them, and with him came Billee. At Billee's side loped Krall.

"Ah, that's where Bee got away to," observed Marcee.

"But undoubtedly with authorization," smiled Karen. "She has a way of getting herself posted where she wants to be."

A large black insect approached the black stump on which the bucket had been set down. Karen had never seen one like it. The creature, in shape like a heavy-set wasp, seemed to stab at the stump

furiously with its abdomen, then, as if disappointed, flew hopefully toward Nine-ah.

"Hey! No way!" She swatted at it vigorously with the ladle, hopping in a circle. "Git!" she shouted. The insect almost seemed to shrug, then lazied away toward a still-smoking tree in the direction of the approaching crew.

"What *was* that?" asked Karen.

"A stump fucker. They hurt like the dickens!" replied the Roundhouser.

"A what?"

"It's a horntail," offered Marcee. "They come out after a fire and lay eggs in burnt wood; Mr. Bolo told me about them. They don't have a stinger; it was trying to lay an egg in Nine-ah. They've been a trouble to the firefighters."

"I can imagine."

"And I'm not planning to be a mommy for any bug," said Nine-ah, still waving the ladle.

This, delivered in the girl's high-pitched voice, somehow struck both of the mothers-to-be as hilarious. Nine-ah and Raoul joined in. Karen was pleased to see that Raoul had mellowed under Nine-ah's influence. She had always found him, along with his twin, a bit forbidding. She sat down heavily next to Marcee.

Raoul, still laughing, walked to the cart and lifted out an armful of bowls. With his free hand he waved to Wilson's group and pointed to the pot. Nine-ah took a bowl from the stack, lifted off the pot lid and began ladling.

Billee ran ahead, with Krall loping along beside her, and took the bowl.

"Bee, aren't you a little fast?" asked Nine-ah.

"It's not for me, silly." She sniffed at the soup. "Oh, yay, you used the fish we got ya!"

"Mm-hm," said Karen.

"And there's ... comfrey?"

"We've run out of much else; Juanita says the poison's overrated anyway."

Billee turned toward Wilson as he came up to them.

"Oh, no you don't," smiled Wilson. "Newcomers first, in honor of Deerie's magnificent efforts." He waved Billee toward Bolo, who arrived next.

As the crew milled around the soup pot and the water buckets, laughing and talking, another group came into view, walking up the road from the direction the cart had come. These were farmers who had missed the cart's deliveries along the unburnt fields, led by Emilio. With him, among others, were Tomma, Josep, and Marleena. Marleena's hair, Karen noted, was long and dark, and braided like

Nine-ah's.

Karen caught Marcee's eye. "How long is all this hair going to last?"

"Until they all start itching, I'd guess. We never have gotten rid of the things. seems to me they mainly hit us when we all bunched up at Ridge." Marcee's baby kicked, and she placed her hands over her tummy. For a long moment she seemed to be looking inward.

Karen knew the look. A "Braxton-Hicks" contraction was in progress, according a book in Dr. Chaney's possession, from which he had been teaching them both.

"That one looks serious."

"Nahh." Marcee's body relaxed. "I wish we'd had a chance to do quarantine when everyone came over the hill. They've saved us, but they could yet make us sick."

"Or vice versa."

"Well, anyway, they didn't bring the lice. Or the rats. I don't think Ridge ever had a rat problem before."

"You and Avery have been really frantic about that."

"Well, he's been all about the damage they're doing to what's left of the stored food. I'm thinking more about plague. We don't really have any defenses against that."

"You keep us busy hunting them down. That's good practice, actually; I've been using the rat hunts to train on tactics." Karen could see a mild state of alarm spread over Marcee's face. "Don't worry; we handle them with sticks."

"I didn't believe it when I first heard about that, but I'm beginning to see how that works. And it helps! Especially in the absence of cats."

"I've wanted to ask about that..." Karen did not complete her question. The mood in the air had changed. A bald young woman whom Karen didn't recognize was speaking in a low voice, her words directed at Wilson. Karen looked at Krall. The dog, who had hopped toward Josep to greet him, was pointed directly at the speaker, with her shaggy mane bristling.

And Krall's tail was still.

Wilson put his hands on his hips. "I really don't *think* so," he was saying.

Karen scabbled at the tree trunk with her hand. "Marcee, help me stand up," she whispered.

Marcee reached for Karen's back as she tried, belly and all, to lean forward. As Karen came to her feet, she could see, in the sharp, staccato slow-motion with which she saw at such times, that the stranger's right hand had reached beneath her tunic. Self-preservation had kicked in for most of those standing around Wilson; already they streamed away from him to left and right. Wilson, who seemed



paralyzed, was clearly not reaching for the Ruger Army revolver, holstered at his waist. Billee, still holding the bowl, which was slopping soup, was stepping across to get in front of him.

Karen focused on the woman, clearly a Creeker like herself though unknown to her. The hand had withdrawn from the tunic and was already extending a silvery object toward Wilson. The dog was

leaping toward the hand, but would not get there in time.

There were two almost simultaneous pops, neither very loud.

Billee, who had lurched across in front of Wilson, had not had time even to shout a warning. But now, she grunted, and fell past him at Karen's feet.

The woman with the silvery object stepped backward, her right eye blooming red, and fell to the ground as well. Two surprisingly large clouds of dirty gray smoke formed, and hung in the air. Karen lowered the old High Standard revolver, following the stranger with it as she fell.

But there was no need for a second shot.

In times gone by, perhaps the scattering crowd would have given itself over to shouts and screams at this point. But Creekers and Roundhousers had seen much of this kind of thing over time, albeit seldom among themselves. Though the shock was great, everyone immediately sought to be useful.

"Marcee! Quick!" shouted Emilio, gesturing toward Billee. Karen holstered the revolver and turned, extending her hand toward Marcee, who grabbed hold with both of hers and heaved herself up.

Emilio himself knelt by the other woman, but, as Karen could have told him, she was beyond help.

Billee had got herself up on her hands and knees and reached for the inverted bowl, turning it upright with a shaking hand before collapsing again. Wilson knelt and turned her over, producing a knife with which he cut away at the fabric over her collarbone. A purple bruise – no, puncture – came to light, from which dark blood welled up slowly, like pus from a boil.

Marcee, supported by Karen, sagged to her knees beside Billee's head. "Breathe slowly, honey."

"Yes'm." Billee bit her lip.

"It's okay to cry, just breathe as good as you can."

"*Nhn-nh.*" Billee bit down harder. Her eyes rolled toward Wilson. She began shivering.

"Can we get underneath here and see if there's an exit wound?" asked Marcie.

"There is," said Wilson. Dropping his gun belt, he lifted his own tunic. A red blotch, blackish in its center like Billee's, graced the place where his ribs came together.

"Oh, Jeeah."

"S'okay. Bee slowed it up. It's stopped in the bone."

Marcee looked over toward Emilio. "And how's *your* patient?" she asked grimly.

"Gone, doctor."

"Right. Well, we need some arnica salve, some soldier weed, and some vodka." She looked over at Wilson. "and a good pair of needle

nose pliers. Can we get all that from Peacher's? Or Maggie's?"

"I'll go to Maggie's," said a voice in the back.

"Please do. Don't want to wait to get them to Chaney's."

Jorj, who had just arrived, pushed through. "Here ya go." He extended both hands to Marcee. In one hand he held an old-time multitool, unfolded and ready to use as a pliers; in the other, a brown stoppered glass bottle. Marcee nodded and reached for them.

Karen stepped forward. She stooped and picked up the silvery thing, which she had seen before only in one of her father's magazines. It was heavy for its size; a tiny white-handled pistol with two barrels and no trigger guard, in nickel, covered with engravings. Twenty-two, from the bore size. The stolen round, no doubt. *Damn*. "Who *is* this?"

Emilio looked up, surprised. "You have not met with her in all this time?"

"No, I really don't think so."

"Then she must have somehow avoided you on purpose. She is Mr. Armon's sister, Arda."

Of course, Huskey's widow. Karen could now vaguely remember having been warned against this person – by whom? And she had tried to recall the conversation at the time of the aborted festival. Now she regretted not having managed to follow up.

Before either of them could say anything else, Marcee yelped. Everyone turned to her. She was squatting in front of the still kneeling Wilson, with a tiny bullet in the grip of the multitool in her hand, looking down at the ground. Fluid, like water but more viscous, was draining away from her shoes across the impermeable surface of the wagon road. It ran underneath the shivering girl beside her.

"I, uh ... Mr. Jorj, could you give Billee's shoulder a shot of this?" She handed him back the bottle. "And then ... I've changed my mind; let's get all three of us onto the cart and back to Ridge. Or, no, Chaney's will do. And could someone see if Dr. Chaney could come see to us? And Elsa? ... And maybe Juanita, and you, Karen? Somebody help me up."

Many willing hands reached forward. Wilson stood up on his own. He looked at Marcee, and she seemed to understand him immediately. "Yeah, Arda too, poor thing. We'll drop her off at Hall."

"Will there not be an 'inquiry'?" asked Josep. He looked uphill toward the dead tractor. Dr. Mary sat disconsolately in her chair by the upraised engine hood. She would have to wait her turn for transportation.

"Of a certainty," said Emilio, standing up. "But babies first."

Elsa Chaney felt the weight of all her years. She reached the cloth into the bowl, wrung it out, folded it, and placed it on Marcee's forehead.

Karen appeared in the doorway in a long white shift, with a hazel staff in her hand. She glanced, with a wry expression, at the long-unused isolation room with its huge glass window. "May I come in?"

"Of course. Pull up a chair."

Karen leaned her staff against the wall, and hung her coolie hat on a convenient peg. She eased herself into the spare straight-backed chair.

"So is it over? You're not a prisoner or anything?" asked Elsa.

"Yes. No. There were many witnesses, and their testimonies largely agreed, so the ad-hoc council did not have to deliberate long. I'm cleared."

"You seem not very happy about that."

"There are so many ways all this should not have happened. I did not think clearly after the festival."

"None of us did, and Arda was, we think, unwell. But it's not like *you* to dwell on might-have-beens."

"This place has changed me, Mrs. Chaney. I think – there's an old expression in my readings which you may remember: 'bought into'."

"I do remember that; it seems quaint, but it fits." She reached to the still woman in the bed and turned over the cool compress.

"Yes, I've *bought into* the Creek's notions of what is civilized. And it has reduced my effectiveness."

Elsa grimaced. "Excuse me, but you always struck me as a good match for us."

"You say that with a hint of bitterness."

"We're, we're *barely* civilized. Organized, maybe; but everyone goes armed all the time and trains all the time, whenever we're not planting or harvesting something. I always had a beef with perpetual war, I think. And that's what this is. *Perpetual* war."

"Consider what the world went through. There was bound to be attrition once the spent fuel pools boiled over and the food distribution broke down. You saw it yourself; much more than those of us who came after."

"I sometimes wish I'd died, too, so as *not* to've seen it all. But now there are so few of us, you'd think we'd leave one another in *some* peace."

The baby woke up. Swaddled like a papoose, she could only crinkle up and cry, blinking up at the blank ceiling.

Karen stood and strode over to the bassinet. She gripped the opposite rim and pulled it away from her to prop it against the wall, tipping the squalling bundle toward herself, then scooped the child up. She carried her awkwardly back to her seat, jostling the bundle into a

better position on her hip. As she sat down, she began jiggling the baby, who quieted a bit and seemed to try to focus on her. There were still flecks – milia – on her tiny nose. As they locked eyes, Karen felt her own child shifting in the womb. She inched her hand around and offered her pinky finger to the child, who sucked at it instinctively, setting off an odd sensation in Karen's breasts. There was a particularly hard kick, which she'd learned to expect at emotional moments. "How's Marcee?"

"Good," said Elsa. Something in her voice made Karen look up. Elsa shook her head silently and bit her lip; her eyes were wet. This had been said in case Marcee could hear. "Tell you what; Tom is resting; he's all wrung out. Bee and Wilson came back here briefly after the inquiry and have gone up to Ridge ahead of you. Juanita's here to spell me and is in the kitchen or out back. Why not look her up and she'll fill you in."

Karen nodded, looked over at the bassinet, then looked down at the bundle tucked in her arm, and got up, baby and all, to head for the hallway. When they emerged from the shadows, she found not Juanita but Marleena, peeling green skin from withered potatoes.

"Hi," Karen said.

"The Lord be with you," replied Marleena, cutting up one of the potatoes into a bowl. She looked up, and saw that Karen was looking at the peelings curiously. "The green bits are, you know, they have poisons in them."

Karen nodded. "Solanine, it used to be called – it's, the potato's trying to be a leaf, that's the green. But it means there's solanine all through the spud."

"I thought maybe it was like that, but there aren't any left that don't have the green, so" She reached for another potato and knocked off the long sprouts.

"It doesn't hurt much to eat them, I think. Anything to stretch them out?"

"For safety, or to cover the bitterness?"

"Both, sure."

"Yes, some barley cakes were left to go moldy for your Dr. Marcee and they gave her the moldy bits and I will crumble up what is left into this. There is some dried kale to go in, as well. And your Mr. Tomma brought us a ground squirrel, which I will use tonight. I have put its guts in a bag and we will cook them in this, to get a little extra something."

"You know, that actually sounds – yummee."

"*Yummee*', is that a word?"

"I think so. Listen, is there anything here for a newborn? I, I don't know much about them."

"For little Arda, yes; I thought you would never ask." She picked up

an ancient terrycloth dishcloth and dried her fingers. "In the springhouse is the last of the milk the poor girl expressed for her."

"Well, she's asleep again, no rush." Karen started. "Arda?"

"Yes, that is what she has named her." Marleena's expression softened. "I think I approve. It says something about you Creekers as a people, I think."

"I understand you. All right, Arda it is."

Arda opened her eyes. She took a last inquisitive pull at Karen's finger and let go. Squeezing her tiny eyes shut, she held her breath, reddening.

"Explosion coming, I think," said Karen.

"Right. Milk coming right up." Marleena ran out the back door.

Arda howled, and Karen vainly jogged her up and down. *What are we going to do with you when this milk is gone?*

Marleena came in, Juanita at her heels. They busied themselves at the sink, and Juanita turned to Karen with a large square plastic bottle. It had a long torpedo-shaped nipple affixed to it. "This was for calves and maybe bummer lambs," said Juanita, as she positioned the bottle for the baby, balancing it on Karen's shoulder. "It's all we've got."

"I'm glad to see it, even so," said Karen, as Arda settled in for a long pull. "This is the last, though, isn't it? I'm guessing she's not ready for broth."

"Her chances would be better with the milk, yes. I have some very ancient condensed milk hidden away at Ridge. I am hoping Ro-eena has reached there by now and will send us Mr. Guchi with the cans."

Marleena stood apart, arms akimbo. It occurred to Karen that Marleena was not entirely comfortable with Juanita. Could this be that thing, of which she had long heard and read, but never yet seen – racism? Or it could be something personal? Whatever it was, Marleena seemed resigned to fitting in. That would have to do. So many things would have to do.

Marleena's eyes met Karen's. "I – could I hold her? I lost mine, you know."

Karen uncurled her arm a bit, then noticed her own envy as Marleena scooped up child with one hand, bottle with the *other*. She felt her face about to give her away, and turned to Juanita. "Elsa tells me you can tell me about Marcee?"

"It is not good. Doctor Tom thinks sepsis."

"Childbed fever."

Juanita glanced at the Marleena and the child, now rocking in the kitchen corner. "As you know, breech presentation, a first child, and that long day of weak contractions. We're just not good for Caesarians any more. Too much pain, not enough opium. And then afterward ... peritonitis probably, said Dr. Tom. And the bread mold does not work on the bugs, the strep, as it once did."

"I could see that Doctor Tom was thinking these things."

"Yes. And it was so."

"We're going to lose her."

"Already she does not respond to us."

Each became lost in her own thoughts. It occurred to Karen that at some point, someone would wonder aloud who would be the next apprentice doctor. And that someone else would point out the obvious. "Things have gotten beyond that point," someone would say. "Not enough people, too much work." Yes. *We will all have to know a little bit about it. And we will let the rest go.*

The baby began to fuss again. Marleena addressed herself to Karen. "This nipple is too stiff. Is there nothing else?"

"There are a few old latex gloves somewhere. Doctor Chaney wore a pair," Juanita replied. "We could cut a finger from one and puncture the tip."

"I know where they are," offered Karen. She walked back down the hall toward the front rooms. Supplies, such as they were, would be on the right. She looked in on the left as she passed the infirmary. Elsa, looking even grayer and more frail than ever, sat by the bed with her face buried in her hands.

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Ellen Murchison stood up, painfully. Her back was "killing" her, as the old expression went. In the cooling weather, the stone hut was beginning to sap the warmth from her bones. She should go down the mountain, as her son and her friends kept urging her; yet something held her here. If she could just keep watch a little longer – until the crops were established? – no, beets and collards did not need her to watch over them from here. Until the rains came and the Creek flowed from bank to bank again, instead of trickling from foul pool to stinking slough? No, nothing she could do with her binoculars to bring those teasing mare's tails on the horizon closer.

Well, then?

Time for another three-sixty. She swept the western horizon first, as always. Trees, trees – mostly leafless, too, though it was late summer. She could still see flashes of color from long-dead trucks and automobiles on what the young people had aptly named the Highway of Death. Pilgrims had kept open a trail along there, trudging mostly along the safety lane along the median, as the forest grew up around the vehicles. On the right flank of this vista stood the remains of the Eagles' Nest; the cell tower, with its truncated and blackened top, permanently marked the spot where Mo-reen had died at the beginning of that ugly little war. Not in vain – she'd provided the information she was there to provide. The Creek community had then

pulled through by the skin of their teeth. That was why Ellen was here: anyone could watch for an approaching enemy, but only she could do it to honor her granddaughter.

To the north, trees; many of them burned. The Great Fire had angled to the north and west, eventually burning itself out among the cottonwoods near the North-Running River. When the rains returned – *as they must*, she thought fiercely – perhaps all those lands would skim over in a thin swath of green.

That, she remembered from somewhere, is what life does. After a flood, a fire, a volcano. The grass and the flowers pick up where they have left off. So far.

To the east, devastation. Here the Great Fire had roared into the valley, essentially swatting aside the Creek's firefighters like flies. No, that was unfair. They had held at Lazar's Creek. She could see Maggie's and Delsman's, and there were people in a field, in a line, bending, working. And there was activity again around the broken little tractor as well. Beyond, the black fingers of perhaps a million trees pointed accusation at the unforgiving skies. Not everywhere – pockets of green remained, even in the upper Creek valley. But things would not be the same, not her lifetime certainly, nor that of the young farmers in that field. *I must mention the increased danger from floods.* Or maybe Mary would handle it. One can't do everything.

She swept the glasses over Ridge. It, too, was blasted. The tall fir forest on the north slope, facing her, had torched off practically all at once, throwing up a cloud that, from here, had reminded her of pictures from the test at Bikini Atoll, back in the last century. Smoke, steam, cinders, whole branches torn from living trees, had been thrown into the upper air. At night it had looked like an old-time Fourth of July; perversely pretty. She had been amazed that none of it had come down on Ball Butte. At her feet, in the near distance, the firs and cedars had been tormented by their summer of great thirst.

But they had not burned.

There was movement on the Ridge road. People, not just those farming, but the very old and very young, few as they now were, trickled back down into the Valley. Living conditions inside the mountain had become – untidy. By Avery's account, everyone was beginning to look like a full-time brig rat. Past time to get them back out into the air! But many of the remaining houses were behind in maintenance and lacked fuel for the coming winter.

It would be touch and go.

Nearer at hand, she could see activity at New Ames. Knurling the focus knob unconsciously, she made out a small group of figures – the slight man leading them appeared to be wearing glasses – that would be Selk – carrying something like a giant colander. Of course, an old satellite dish. They would be using it for their hobby up at Ridge.

Nothing else seemed to be happening along the Road – no, there was a horse, with one of the dogs from Roundhouse. A young man with golden hair ... of course, Mr. Josep. He and Wilson and Karen were working together to re-arm and train the Creek – without interfering with the farming. Well, summer days were long, and young people's energy apparently boundless. Someone said Josep's wife had taken on poor Marcee's baby. Good people had simply walked into the life of the Creek, most of them without benefit of quarantine. No one, apart from Marcee, had been especially ill of late, and her death could not be attributed to the breath of the newbies. *Some things work out. Some don't.*

Around to the right from Hall, where nothing much appeared to be going on, Ellen completed her sweep by looking toward Bridge. There she caught sight of a group of people clustered around a large laden hand cart. That would be some of the Bledsoes.

A sad business, but the death of that poor madwoman, Armon's sister, seemed to be the last straw for the star-crossed family. They had elected, after the most recent Inquiry, to go Pilgrim. No one could sway them to stay. Ellen, among others, had argued they should be *forced* to stay. The risk to the Creek from having one of its crews out roaming around appalled her. But she had been overruled; the Chaney's in particular seemed inclined to accept the risk. Maggie and her crew had almost convinced themselves to join the exodus, but had relented at the last minute.

It was a near thing. Even with the Roundhousers moving in, two families' departure might spell doom for the Creek. *Even one*, she thought, wincing. Avery was more despondent than ever over his endless lists of lacks.

It looked as though the Bledsoes were still deciding where to go. The tallest, which would be Armon, was gesturing toward the Highway; likely they would go north. That made sense.

One more thing goes wrong around here, we'll be following them.

A crunch of sand indicated someone was coming toward the post. Ellen lowered the glasses with one hand, patted the Navy revolver in its holster with the other, and turned. It was the young man from Joseph Farm that had made himself her aide-de-camp; she knew his characteristic step, but one must never make assumptions.

He gave the two-fingered salute that had become common among the younger Creekers. "Ma'am, Hall's regards and the soup of the day." He unshipped a pack basket carefully from his left shoulder and stowed it by the doorway next to the wall. "Not hot, but there's some raccoon liver in it. Might have some staying power."

"We're so eclectic these days. Thank you, Elberd. And what are those?"

He unslung two small rifles from his right shoulder. "These are the

latest thing from Mrs. Allyn and Mr. Deela at the Armory. 'Twenty-twos.' This one is an old 'bolt' thing, with a – 'four-ex'? – 'scope'?, for you, with their compliments, and this one is a tubular –'meg'? – 'semiotto'? – I'm not sure of the words they used, but I've had a little practice, anyway – and I'm good! The bullets don't always work, but they passed this one because the bolt does a pretty good job. Throws away the bad one and puts the next one in. If it sticks, they said dig it out with my knife – Oh! And they said you'd know best about the telescope one."

"I see. Yes, I've been hearing the practice sessions. Did anything come with them? Ammunition, for example?"

"I've got a greased-paper packet for each of us. Fifty in each one. They said these real long ones are for you, and the rest for me, and not to mix them up 'cuz they are two different kinds."

"Mm-hmm, it says here 'twenty-two magnum.' I don't think I even knew she was working on those." Ellen picked up the rifle and read the inscription on its barrel. "Stevens. Never heard of them. Quite the antique." She opened the bolt, looked in the chamber, closed it, put the stock her shoulder and sighted, through the scope, on a tree on Maggie's Hill. Not much of a scope; might even have come from an old BB gun. Better than nothing. She would devote five rounds – that looked like all the diminutive magazine would carry – to sighting in, with an emphasis on downhill work. Much better than nothing! "Is there anything else?"

Elberd grinned. "Karen thought you would ask. She says not to worry about practice, as they're remanufacturing some more of these for you and somebody else –should have them in a week – but that they are hard to clean up after. So here – " he reached into the back of his collar and unhooked from it a long, stiff wire – "is your 'cleaning rod' and I've brought an old cotton rag we can cut up for – for –"

"Patches. Yes. And we can clean the bores with boiling water and then patch them out with a touch of bear grease. Very thoughtful." Ellen held up the wire "rod" and regarded it, amused. Mary had hoarded all sorts of metal products, and Deela must have known where to find this one. A steel "coat" hanger! Yes, it would do for cleaning. Just.

She set the rifle against the wall. "All right, I'll stand down for lunch and you have a sweep with these." She handed him the binoculars and sat down on the end of her camp bed, next to the basket. Inside she found, wrapped for protection in a swath of sheepskin, a half-gallon Mason jar, with rusty cap and ring, full of brown liquid. Oh, well. In her long career in various "MarDets," hungry had made up for nice as a rule, and she was sure it would do so now.

As she began untwisting the ring, Elberd, who had stepped, as post

tradition required, to the west wall first, returned, wide-eyed. "Ma'am? Mrs. Murchison, ma'am?"

"What is it, Mr. Elberd? You really look like you're going to swallow your tongue."

"Could you, could you come have a look at something, please?"

"Will do." She set down the jar and stepped with him to the opening, taking from him the binoculars as they went, and followed his pointing hand with the lenses.

It took a moment for her eyes to cross enough to clear the view through the damaged prisms, but she could see immediately that there had been a change since her last sweep, only minutes ago.

"Do you see it?" Elberd asked in a shaken whisper.

"Indeed I do. Excellent work, young man. Ring up Ridge for me and hand me the phone."

Elberd stepped to the table, hit the doorbell buzzer and reached the heavy handset across to her.

Still watching through the glasses with one hand, Ellen put the earpiece to her ear with the other and pressed the call button with her middle finger. "Avery! Over." She released the button. *Click*.

Click. "This is Minnie-Min, Ma'am. He's down in th' canteen. Get him? Uh, over!" *Click*.

Click. "Yes, *now*, please. *Hop*! Over." *Click*.

Long, precious, terrifying minutes, as it seemed to Ellen, slid by like the scum on the pools of Starvation Creek.

Click. "Avery Murchison. Over." *Click*.

Click. "Son, we have a full-blown emergency out beyond Bridge. Over." *Click*.

Click. "Describe. Over." *Click*.

Click. "We're seeing at about ... two-forty degrees, twenty-five klicks, activity, very large Cat clearing road. Out by the Highway. Over." *Click*.

Click. "Copy, two-forty degrees, twenty-five klicks, Cat, copy. As in crawler tractor? Over." *Click*.

Click. "Yes, dammit. Like a D-8 or D-9. *Functioning*. And it's a hell of a long ways off, I need my telescope back but it looks *armored*. Over." *Click*.

Click. "Copy, armored, roger, telescope, I'll send you Minnie right now – Minnie? Good, *hop*. So, I'm looking at the sheets, this thing is already over the River? Over." *Click*.

Click. "Affirmative, they look like they're aiming for the 228 bridge, Halsey, our direction. Over." *Click*.

Click. "Query, send crew, intercept? Over." *Click*.

Click. "Negative for now, there's more going on that we can't quite see yet, over." *Click*.

Click. "What – " *Click*.

Click. "Avery! Clear the wire, please – truck – Oh, *shit!*" *Click.*
Click. "Clarify, please? Over."
Click. "Son, send a crew, but to reel in the Bledsoes, silent running, stat, they're about to run into trouble out there, 'K.?' Over." *Click.*
Click. "Copy, roger, don't know if they'll comply. What do you see? Over." *Click.*
Click. "Avery, there's a six-by-six out there and it's towing *armored*. A LAV or an old Bradley or something. Chain gun in the turret, I'm sure of it. And there's *more* stuff in the trees. Over." *Click.*
Click. "They're back, then."
A long silence. *Pick up your finger, kid.*
Click.
Click. "Thank you. Yes, in spades. I think trucks and escorting infantry. Preliminary guess, fifty. And this could be an advance echelon. Will watch and report as we learn more. Over." *Click.*
Click. "Copy; will send crew after Bledsoes, could get ugly. Will mobilize Creek. Wild-ass-guess on rate of travel of column? Over." *Click.*
Click. "I'd say they'll be at Bridge within three days. If that gun is functional, you'll be within its range inside a week. Over." *Click.*
Click. "Thank you, ma'am, Butte's done good. Anything else? Over." *Click.*
Ellen took a deep breath. There were things her independent progeny did not care much to say or hear. But now would be a very good time to step over that line.
Click. "When you move, send us a few good hands here too. I love you, son. Over and out."
Click.

Book III

Bright in the Skies

*And now men see not the light which is
bright in the skies; but the wind passeth, and cleanseth them. Job
37:21*

MARY SAVAGE, Ph.D., sighed. On the one hand, the strange old underground DARPA hideout held distinct advantages for her. It was relatively cool in summer and warm in winter, had flat, smooth floors, and a *working* elevator. She, a chair-bound invalid with RA, heart issues and, no doubt, lupus, could particularly appreciate the surroundings. Anywhere but the Creek, she'd be long *dead*. At the Creek, she'd *still* be dead after that hellacious summer, had there been no such retreat. On the other hand, the facility had not been built with her in mind. The doors were all solid-core steel, and they all swung shut with an authoritative click. Anytime she wanted to go anywhere alone meant a good deal of rolling, thumping, grunting and stick-wedging. If the chair had been an electric, she might have found a less strenuous protocol for the doors. The weight of the batteries would have counted for much. Time was, she'd have ordered up a battery-powered chair and Deela and Selk and Ro-eena would have produced it for her. Somehow. They'd all be too busy now at other tasks, most of which she herself had set them.

Time for a drink. That last door had about done her in.

She paused at the refectory door, which, some luck at last, was propped open into the hallway. It was downright odd to see no lights switched on in here; weeks and weeks of full occupancy by most of the Creekers had kept this room constantly buzzing. Now everyone was trying to scatter back to the farms – or those farms whose buildings remained, after that all-consuming forest fire. Well, electricity – the good old-fashioned one-ten-volts-on-demand kind with which she had grown up – was one of Ridge's charms. She reached up and flipped the switch.

Three tables away, someone had been sitting in the dark, head and arm on the table. Unwinding stiffly, the black-haired figure sat up and blinked. It was Karen, long and lean except in the middle – she was great with child, a rarity in itself – and looking leaner because of the shortened and seamed sleeve of her tunic, where her left arm should have been. As always, Mary's heart – and this too, with Mary's avowed objectivism, was a rarity – went out to her.

"Whoa, kiddo. Flashin' light in your eyes. Sorry 'bout that. Catchin' forty?"

"Ma'am? Umm, yes, ma'am. Couldn't sleep lying down." Karen stretched, a cat-like gesture, her hand overhead. "What's shift?"

"It's mid-afternoon outside, if you're asking the time. I thought I would come in and snoop around, see about happy hour. Make one of Wilson's nasty cocktails if nothing else."

"Oh. Well, then, we have a surprise for you. Guchi showed it to me. Hang on."

The ungainly child – *woman, of course, but she's more than half still a child to me* – lumbered out to the kitchen and returned with a

pint-sized Mason jar, lidded and ringed.

"Here you go, ma'am."

"Oh, glory. Is that what I *think* it is?"

"Yes'm, it's your last beer. If Guchi hadn't hid it, Juanita would have poured it into the soup." Karen handed the precious jar to her teacher.

"And she would have been right. I say that myself, even though all my life I've been all about 'I, me, and mine.'" Mary untwisted the ring and, finding the lid unsealed, flipped it onto the table.

"That sounds like a quote."

"Good ear. Ayn Rand. She was where I got my ideas, when I was all of your age, about reason and enlightened self-interest, and so on." She sipped. "*Ahh*. Not much fizz, but *ah* anyways."

"I think I've read about her somewhere. And so you became a physicist?"

"Lots of reasons why people did that. But, sure, I sure didn't see any point going into Comp Lit or MFA. Whole different crowd." Mary could see that the terms confused Karen. "Computers. I *should've* done computers. Rand didn't live long enough – if she'd had, say, 'structured query language' to play with when she was young, I dare say she'd have disappeared into Systems at some university, like any good Aspie, and never gone into fiction." Much of this was going over, or maybe under, Karen's head, she could tell, but Mary plowed on. "I like hands-on. Shapes, textures, properties. So do you."

"I do, ma'am."

"And the Creekers found me sitting by the roadside out at Bridge – there was a sign there, then: 'Pepsi-Cola; Brownsville Rockhound Emporium; seven miles' – I bet I'd stared at that sign for three hours. And they said – the Murchisons and Elsa – 'y'wanna come live with a buncha folks?' – and they didn't ask me what I could *do*, just did I wanna move in? Well, I thought it beat sitting out there with more and more flies on me, and the buzzards watching." She took a pull at the home brew. "Oh, yeah, that *was* that last batch. Triple hopped, with the last of the hops, fresh. Have a sip? It won't hurt th' kid."

"No, ma'am, you just enjoy it, ma'am."

"Ma'am, ma'am, ma'am. All right, I *will*." She fingered the raised designs on the glass. On one side, the word "Ball" in stylized script; on the other, what was clearly supposed to be the Liberty Bell. Sigh. "Bottoms up. So they took me in, which I found mortifying on the one hand, and a relief on the other, and after while I made myself useful, just like almost everyone else around here. And on the one hand I justified myself to myself with *she that shall not work, shall not eat* –"

"Like me."

"– We're alike in a lot of ways kiddo – but on the other hand knowing that not everybody here *could* work, like Mr. Angle or Mrs. Lazar, much, and we were, y'know taking *care* of them, like they had

taken care of me in th' beginning. So maybe I had a commie streak after all."

Karen put on her thoughtful look, which to Mary always seemed as if she were trying to stare through the wall – or people. "I think, if a group is together, there's strength in sharing. Because each of us takes turns being strong, the able one. You can't always know if someone will go weak at one time and then be strong again just when you need them. So – so, a, a mechanism for that is needed, and it's why we have the councils and the general meetings. It evens out the strengths for everyone."

"Yes, the empathy argument. Hence government, bureaucracy and the whole nine yards. Even taxation, Rand help me."

"Well, stockpiling the food here *has* pulled us through – so far." Karen pointed to Mary's half-finished jar.

"Hmph. And when this is done, 'there's an end on't.'" Mary swirled the jar. "So, kid – what can you tell me about th' second law?"

"Entropy, ma'am? It always increases."

"Or remains constant. As long as a little more effort went into this place than we ate up, we were kind of steady state. Productivity might go up or down, but we sometimes had surpluses, and we stored 'em here at Ridge. But if your productivity is less than, or even equal to, your consumption of resources, your troubles will multiply. If entropy always increased, none of us would be here. But life organizes itself in *abundance*, in order to stay ahead of the game. Case in point, babies."

Karen patted her tummy unconsciously. "Yes, ma'am."

Mary finished the beer and set down the jar. "Thing is, more babies, somewhere down the road, more consumption, which is great in the presence of more productivity, up to a *point*. This jar will never know another beer, Mrs. Allyn. There are too many random noises in this location, and insufficient signal to overcome them. All you young people, *take notice*. We old-timers are *stuck* here. Where the signal goes weak, staying one step ahead of entropy requires *mobility*. That would be *you*."

Karen's eyes widened. For a moment, she looked at the empty jar, with its rapidly-drying floor of barley sediments. Then she met Mary's piercing gaze. "Yes, ma'am."

A soft knock at the door brought both their heads round. It was Ro-eena. "Beg pardon, Dr. Mary, Karen."

"Yes?" asked Mary, swinging her chair round.

"Mr. Avery's compliments, and he says, condition absolutely red."

"Invasion?" asked Karen, half-rising.

"We think so," Ro-eena answered. "Karen's presence is requested upstairs, and we may be bringing everybody right back to Ridge today or tomorrow."

Emilio Molinero, in spite of his hurry, kept to what little shade he could find. It would not do to get light-headed just now; though the slant of the afternoon sun bore less heat than it had done at the height of this terrible summer, it still commanded respect. Somewhere ahead of him were the Bledsoes: in his eyes a rabble of disaffected paranoiacs, but Creekers all the same. They had produced Huskey. Though very young, Huskey had shown potential and then some; as a leader he might have pulled all the Creek together.

Also somewhere ahead of him, and hopefully a long way away through the frazzled cottonwoods, there was an army. Ellen Murchison and her crew, the only ones so far that had seen it in the blue distance, could not tell Emilio much about it; the forest, half-dead from drought though it might be, intervened. But there were, apparently in *working* order, a very large bulldozer and trucks of military design, and there was a *tank*. And they were toiling toward Starvation Ridge behind the dozer. It could, he supposed, be a good thing; strangers had come to the Creek in large numbers quite recently and those had not come to destroy, but to cooperate.

Yet in this instance Ellen had not held out such a hope, nor had her dour son Avery. "There is very little alive in the Great Valley, so far as we have seen," Avery had said, drumming his fingers on the arms of his wheelchair. "Except for bugs, sucker fish, possums, coons, coyotes, owls, osprey, and about ten million swamp trees. The Pilgrims have dried up. If civilization was up and running somewhere, the messengers they would send out would travel by twos or threes, maybe ten at the most; they could live on the occasional herd of deer, or maybe learn to use camas or wapato. But this looks like fifty or more, and Ellen does not think there are women or children traveling with them. She feels it must be a war party, carrying its own provisions, and from what she's telling me, I agree. Also, they are heading straight for Ridge."

Wilson, whose still-bandaged chest showed beneath his tunic, had nodded. "Karen has been of the opinion, all along, that the man who led the bandits last year would return and have another go at us. It does look as if that might be the case."

And so here I am, detailed to prevent our runaways from meeting whatever's out there. A fool's errand, to be sure.

Emilio came to the Bridge, which tradition regarded as the gate of Starvation Creek. At right angles to the valley entrance, it marked what had once been an intersection. A country road had crossed the Creek here and gone north, around the base of Ball Butte; another had come from the Great Valley and, crossing the Bridge road just to its north, followed the Creek eastward up into the foothills. It had served,

at one time, perhaps sixty households of part-time farmers, retirees, and commuters. What remained was the cart-track, with its mid-stripe of dried grasses, behind Emilio; the other three roads had very nearly vanished into a young and nondescript forest of, mostly, ash and willow. The few openings were choked with teasel and gorse. Even the Bridge, which had been maintained for many years by the Creekers, looked disheveled in its rust and its skirt of weeds – what a difference a distracted year makes!

He shifted the strange little rifle to his left hand, gripping it by the pump-action forearm. He was himself used to bow and crossbow, but Karen had made a strong case for the longer range of the bullets she and Deela had so painstakingly made. The weapon could speak with authority some twenty times with the tiny bullets in his possession. Ten of them rested, malign in their potential indifference, in the hollow tube beneath the barrel.

Which way to go? Stooping, with his right hand he tested the edge of a slight depression in the dust. Recent passage – but by whom? And were they going north or south?

Emilio became wary. Though he was not conscious of having heard a sound, he looked, without standing up, over his shoulder, and could see that someone had trailed out from the valley behind him. With relief, he recognized Josep, the young leader of the Roundhousers – now Josep of the Creek, of one of the farms. The wild blond hair was partially covered by a wide-brimmed conical straw hat like Emilio's. Josep carried a rifle on a sling, but also a strung bow on his other shoulder, and a water bottle swung from his hand. With the other he waved cheerily to his friend.

"Well met, Mr. Emilio, and has our quarry absconded?"

"I am having, shall we say, a slow time of it; the ground is so dry and in so many places hard. Have you been sent to assist in the search?"

"I am an afterthought of your many-headed leadership, suggested by myself. We all know you like to work alone, but it's prudent to have someone watch the trees while your own eyes scan the earth. Besides, I'm tired of the hoe."

"Ah. Well, I am not displeased. But if memory serves me, you are the better tracker of us two. Let us trade roles for a time. Here are tracks, I think; but to me they lead nowhere."

Josep leaned over to inspect Emilio's findings, while Emilio, with his rifle at the ready, watched the surroundings. Josep walked first to the left, then to the right, nodding to himself. He snapped off a tall grass stem and chewed the end of it thoughtfully. "They have parleyed among themselves where to go from here. They have with them one hand cart? Yes – drawn first south, then north, and then the pace opens up. It is confusing because your people walk heel to toe, usually, and

here they are urging themselves forward, and so the toes make the deeper impression. When this trail strikes the brush, it should be a little more obvious. How many?"

"Eight."

"So few? How *have* you kept these farms going? But there were ten, not so long ago. And there was even a child at one time."

"Attrition among us, as with you. In my lifetime there were at one time more than three hundred Creekers."

"Yes. So I think we go this way; and from the description given by Mrs. Murchison on the mountain above us, we may catch them up in two hands' time, maybe more."

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Two of Lacey's men would be watching for a signal from him. He studied the few birds in the trees nearby, and concluded from them that there was little danger anyone would overhear a conference, so he beckoned. Both, carrying juniper-wood in one hand, with a ready arrow in the other, caught up to him noiselessly. Each wore trousers, a jerkin and moccasins, made from deerskin and decorated with rows of colorful porcupine quills. They wore their hair braided and tied off, with long leather thongs, and, as he had done, they had painted their sunburned cheeks and foreheads with fat into which green leaves had been pounded, to please Spirit and make themselves at peace with Death. Were it not for their luxurious beards, an observer in this place some two centuries gone might have taken them for Calapooia Indians.

Lacey turned his palm down, and the three squatted among the bracken in the shade of a thirsty ash tree. "There are eight. I feel certain they are from the valley that will be contested; they do not look like those that have been on Pilgrimage for months. Their passage is noisy and they are not watching well. Soon they will make camp and sleep, perhaps with one guard. Bring two more of our men; that should be enough. We will collect them and make them serve the People."

"Sir—" said one, touching his forehead with an index finger. "—the Machine-man Mullins said to bring anyone we find to him?"

"Now that we are away from the column, I have freedom to speak," replied Lacey. "The Machines and their army are weaker than we were told, and to feed them requires the good will of Magee, which surely they no longer have. We will see this through a little longer; may be this war will be simple. May be not. We must make preparations to abandon their campaign, should we find it necessary to do so. We conduct the present operation on our own, and perhaps provide ourselves with new Bringers of Food."

"Sir, this is wise. I shall go and get the others."

"Good; two of us will do to see these travelers to their beds. Bring our men and follow us from here; we will break twigs at head height every thirty paces to show our line of march."

"In Spirit I go."

"In Spirit we await you."

...

"I am depressed as all *get-out*," said Magee, stirring his coffee with a silver spoon.

"I am sorry, to hear that, my lord," replied The Doctor demurely. She reached for the creamer.

Magee peered at her over his glasses. *Still nice hair, after all these years. Wonder what she dyes it with.* "Nothing ever gets under your skin, does it?"

"There are many sharks in the water,' my lord, as one of my professors once told me, 'and if you choose one to worry over, another will bite you.'"

"Ah, that's th' stuff. Well, even so, *everthin's* bitin' me today. First, I got th' inventory from the orchards-keeper; th' weather this summer has ruind th' pears. With the diesel I lent 'em, they couldn't pump enough river to save more than about three hundred acres total. An' th' rivers-keeper chimed in with record-heat *this* an' record-low *that*; upshot is, not enough fish comin' up th' Rogue or Umpqua, either one, to do any good. Meats-keeper, same diffy, th' herds from th' wild animal park are goin' t' predators an' bad pasture an' too many mouths t' feed. So everybody's come here an' lookin' t' *me* t' feed 'em out 'a th' bunkers."

"I have looked into that, my lord; there are twenty-four pallets of MRE remaining untouched, plus a partial. With so many coming here to seek assistance, we are good for about two months." She reached him a steaming bowl. "Have some 'beef teriyaki'; you've barely touched it."

Magee waved it off. "'Twenty-five-year shelf life' my *ass*. That batch started goin' off two years ago early; don't care for it."

"You may watch me; my lord," smiled the Doctor, as she spooned a portion onto her plate. "If I 'keel over,' you will know it is truly past date."

"Ah-h-h." Magee gestured impatiently. "*Worst* is, th' last runner came in whining about somebody had raided that damned gun store Wolf was so effin' proud of – assuming it was ever there. And then – suddenly no runners! Why am I not surprised? I have cut off all shipments to Mullins till I hear anythin' *good* from up around there."

"That is the right thing to do, my lord. For a start." The Doctor

sipped at her coffee and dipped her fork into the teriyaki.

"Whatcha thinkin', my dear? If I may ask."

"There are many ways.' First, let us assume the weapons were there. Mullins has them, and begins to appreciate his apparent new-found power. He may think well of his chances of not only capturing the power plant, but of deposing *you*."

"Thought of that; but wouldn't he keep sending runners to keep me happy and stupid?"

"They might think they could do such; but a fabricated story comes unraveled under much scrutiny. My young men take care to make an extended visit with each runner, and they are, in effect, cross-examined."

"As always, love your thoroughness, Doc."

"Second, let us assume the weapons are, as described, gone. Mullins may have encountered those who took them and been defeated; or is perhaps engaged with them."

"But, my dear Doctor, wouldn't someone have been dispatched to ask for reinforcements?"

"Of a certainty, my lord, though perhaps they would have been intercepted. There is almost no way to here from there without using the route we have ourselves constructed."

"The eternal problem of long and unguarded lines of communication." Magee rubbed his stubbled chin thoughtfully *Huh. Out of razor blades. Oh, well.* "Yeah; but I dunno. Those nomads are good at givin' anybody th' slip. Got a third?"

"But of course, my lord. The tribals may have chosen to turn upon Mullins, either to obtain the weapons, or in the instance of the empty gun store, to end the alliance due to a perception that the campaign is lost."

"That's good thinking, my dearie, but I deprecate it on two counts. They are sincere in their dislike of machinery to th' point where th' thought of handling an assault rifle makes 'em bug-eyed. Seen that myself. And in t'other case, I think Lacey would see things through."

"He is indeed the 'noble savage,' my lord." The Doctor reached for a paper napkin. "And now, fourth."

"Yes-s-s? Y'always save th' best for last." Magee narrowed his eyes and tipped back his head, watching her through thick lenses.

The Doctor smiled. "It is my sense of drama. *Your* man, Wolf, who in my humble opinion should have died or remained imprisoned here, rather than in your most important vehicle, has escaped."

"I think that most likely, Doctor, an' it *has* occurred t'me. In any event I have relied upon Mullins at a distance, and your shark has bit me."

The Doctor smiled her widest smile. "There are possibilities. Wolf may once again return here; if so, he is unlikely to use the road we

have made. Or he may choose to take an interest in Mullins' army; or he may seek his stolen armory. Mullins and Lockerby will have thought about these matters, meanwhile. They know you cannot be happy with them; and without the provisions you have been sending, they have insufficient scope to return and defend themselves by attacking you. They may await you in a defensive posture, or they may run away, or they may seek some form of leverage."

"Mmm-hmm. If I was Mullins, I'd go after the power plant for myself, use it as a bargaining chip with me. Yep. Th' war is still on, I bet. Only, for th' moment, it ain't *my* war." Magee reached for the teriyaki. "I see th' stuff hasn't killed ya, so I'll just hold my nose an' have a go." He emptied the bowl onto his plate. "Huh. 'Morsels, Regurgitated, Eviscerated.' S'why this stuff stayed *behind* when the Yew Ess Army left. And now ... what do ya recommend, O all-knowin' one?"

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Errol dipped the cloth in the cool water of the washbasin, wrung it out, and folded it twice before replacing it on his patient's forehead. The door behind him swung open silently. Feeling the draft, he turned. It was Elsa Chaney. He looked long; she seemed so frail he felt he could see through her. *How is she going down so quickly?*

Elsa smiled; it was that uncertain, staccato smile that came when she was trying to think of too many things at once. "Ready to switch out?"

"Sure."

But he didn't get up to leave, so she sat down in the spare chair. "GM's over."

"Mmh."

"It was short. There's so little to decide on these days. It's all been taken out of our hands really."

"Yes."

"So, how is she?" Mrs. Chaney gestured toward Mrs. Ames, who lay very still. Considering the effects, until recently of the Parkinson's, it was almost like looking at a stranger. One side of Mrs. Ames' face had suddenly sagged, yesterday or the day before, and her eyes had gone silent. She lay with her nose against the improvised burlap pillow. Near her mouth, the burlap was wet.

"No change, but the breathing is slower. I think today or tomorrow, she will go down to Hall for recycling."

Recycling. It was a word, used in this context, that always startled Elsa, though she supposed she began the tradition herself. *Return everyone to Jeeah. Honor the earth by wasting nothing.* Et cetera. Everyone had gone along with it, but in their hearts and in hers, death remained a waste; the feeling could not, it seemed, be shaken off. She

reached out and patted Mrs. Ames' hand. "What they said was, every 'non-combatant'" – she spoke the term wryly – "to Ridge; that would be me. Everyone else to Hall; that would be you. It's a mobilization."

"They will try to speak with the strangers before making assumptions, Mrs. Chaney. You do know that?"

"I'm not as naïve as even *I* think, Errol. As Tom would say, *did* say in the meeting, nobody would haul a *tank* all the way here from Jeeah knows where just to say hi."

Juanita came in, followed by Karen, Raoul, and one of the women from Roundhouse. Karen and Juanita wore the shifts, made from found fabric, common to women at Ridge; Raoul and the girl, who seemed to Elsa very young, wore the leather jerkins and trousers meant for farming – and for warfare. Already they were wearing their swords. Raoul also carried a finely crafted cruiser's axe, which Elsa recognized as Errol's.

Juanita stepped forward. "Is this a good time?" she whispered.

"Oh, I think you may speak normally. If Mrs. Ames is in there somewhere listening, she'll want to hear everything." Elsa smiled. She offered her hand to the young woman, who had clearly attached herself to Raoul. "You must be Nine-ah. I was expecting long braids."

"Ma'am. We're, one by one, giving up on hair."

"We have no idea how we got so – *lousy* – here; what you must think of us!"

"We had more trouble with ticks at our place. Things come out even, I think."

Juanita stepped to the bed, beside Errol, who stood up. He offered her the chair. She accepted, but gestured toward the others. "We cannot stay long."

Errol nodded; his terse smile appeared briefly. "Nor can I, I expect. My shift here is up, and you're collecting me."

"Yes. I am going to go look for food with Guchi and Marleena, and you all are going to Hall."

Karen leaned against the wall. "Except me. I get to go do ordnance with Mary, Deela, Selk, and Ceel."

Elsa released Mrs. Ames' hand.

Juanita's hand took the place of Elsa's, briefly. Juanita leaned down to Mrs. Ames' ear. "Go with Jeeah, Mrs. Ames."

She rose to go, and Raoul took her place, self-consciously adjusting his sword and handing the axe to Errol. Taking Mrs. Ames' hand in his, and looking, to Elsa, suddenly very grown up, he said, "Go with Jeeah, Mrs. Ames."

Raoul stood, and strode to the door, turning toward Nine-ah, and nodding. Nine-ah stepped over to the bed, touched Mrs. Ames' face, and said, in a suddenly small voice, "The Lord be with you." Then she went to Raoul, and they went out together after Juanita, Errol with

them.

Karen, steadying herself against the chair back, sat down heavily. She took Mrs. Ames' hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, but, looking across to Elsa, said nothing at all.

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A damp fog arose from the Creek at sunset. It drifted through the cottonwoods and into the shabby fields, then hung there, a homeless ghost. Those working on the rifle pits felt the chill with a shock, after the hottest summer most of them had yet experienced. It would be time, after their shift, to go to the remaining farmsteads, or Hall, or even Ridge, to seek out heavier clothing, and some even thought about their rain capes.

Tomma rubbed his head. *Hair's getting long, almost enough to comb. Already finding nits; must get Vernie to shave it.* He shifted the Hawken in his arms and wondered about the dryness of its powder. The new percussion caps were a concern, too. Deela had run tests and said they were reliable; but there weren't enough yet to practice and verify it. Tomma liked verification a lot.

He stepped from the deep shadows onto the road and peered into the distance. Yes, whatever had called to his attention was out there; movement. He reached for his whistle. One long blast would send the shovelers leaping to their bows – or, as was more often the case now, to their new twenty-twos.

The movement resolved into two figures whose gaits he recognized: Emilio and Josep. Tomma relaxed a little as they passed Bridge; their manner suggested no known danger following them. Yet he forced himself to re-focus, to study the limits of sight and hearing. One never knew whether one's friends might have let down their guard, might have missed something. Josep halted and turned to watch and listen as well – a good man. Emilio came on, moving to the side of the road and clambering through a brushpile as he neared the agreed-upon site of the punji pits.

The pits were an idea of Jorj's; he had set the older people building the traps; a wooden box, open at the top, about two feet square, with sixteen-penny nails driven through the bottom. A final touch, devised by Maggie, was the smearing of excrement on the nails. These boxes were be buried in the road and in various paths approaching the valley, open at the top and covered with fragile mats of reedy material and enough dirt, moss, or what-have-you to blend into the terrain. There were none yet in the road, but Emilio, who had been gone for a couple of days, could not know that, and his caution both amused and impressed Tomma. He smiled as Emilio's short legs became entangled in the heaped gorse.

Tomma cupped his hands around his mouth and hailed. "Word?"
Emilio stopped in mid-clamber and nodded, unsmiling. "Itch. Word?"

"Scratch."

"Am I past the danger here yet, my friend?"

"I'd say so, seeing how we haven't buried traps yet."

Emilio smiled wryly. "Ah, you could perhaps have saved me some trouble."

"But then I woulda had to shout louder; don't want our voices to carry too far out here."

"It is true; and so I forgive." Emilio shifted his twenty-two to his other hand and unshipped his backpack. "Here comes Mr. Josep; let us all leave the road."

They did so. Ro-eena appeared from the shadows; she and Tomma nodded to each other and she took his place at the roadside.

Tomma went to his stash, sat down, and pulled out strips of jerky for the travelers. "Got news for us?"

Josep looked for Emilio's assent – Emilio, famished, was busy with his jerky – and replied. "It is – not good. We did find the Bledsoe party and they indicated they would not offer hospitality, though they appreciated our warning and our concern."

Emilio nodded. "We talked for some time with Armon; clearly he was very sad, and of two minds, but his people were firm with him in their desire to go north."

Josep took a swig from a water bottle. "I recommended they at least make for Roundhouse and watch for a few days before proceeding. Armon said he would consider it. But I could see the others were not pleased."

"An unhappy crew," Tomma shrugged. "Can't tell if we're better off without 'em or not."

"We are not 'better off' without anyone; there are far too few Creekers, even were we not faced with whatever is out there." Emilio tightened his grip on the little rifle. "But they had become very unreliable, it is to be admitted."

"That's putting it nicely," replied Tomma. "So, any sign of our visitors?"

Josep and Emilio looked at each other. "My friend here," said Emilio, "believes we were seen, and that we were not alone in following the Bledsoes. I felt something as well, but saw or heard nothing to confirm this."

Josep stood poking at the ground with the end of his bow. "They were very, very careful. We made a long detour coming back, in hopes of uncovering signs of passage, but there was nothing almost."

"Almost?"

"Deliberately bent twigs, parallel to the Bledsoes' track, which had

then been straightened again. Perhaps a few depressions in the earth. Extremely skilled and light passage. I cannot believe this could have been the same crew as whoever they are that have that enormous bulldozer."

"This is getting complicated."

"Yes." Emilio stood up and reached for his pack. "We will go, and report. Where do we find Wilson?"

"He'll be at Hall." Tomma stood up as well. "I think we'll throw a little patrol out past Bridge tonight, and get those traps buried before morning. Wouldn't want anyone to see us setting them out."

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Wolf considered his situation. The clothing –and the protein – from the kid had come in handy; fall was definitely on the way. He regretted his second victim, however; he'd found the Eastsiders very likable, and particularly the man who had found him: a silent, diligent and loyal retainer to that serious-minded chief, Lacey. But there was no letting him go back to report. So, now, Wolf possessed a nicely balanced juniper-wood bow, a quiver of arrows, two very handy knives, two changes of clothing, and – best of all, moccasins that almost fit. The kid's shoes had proven, as he'd expected, multiple sizes too small. On the downside, however, Wolf's neck was still adorned with Mullins' nasty handiwork – the neck shackle, with its sixty-two links of chain. He wore the chain inside the camouflaged jumper, to keep it quiet, but the steel next to his skin bugged him – both as a sign of his recent abject captivity, and as a constant irritant to his flesh: the links were cold, and sometimes they pinched.

He turned to his companion and spoke softly. "And as for *you*, I have no idea what to do with ya."

The big Appaloosa snorted, looked at him from one big brown eye and then the other, then lowered its head and lipped a few leaves from whatever green things carpeted the forest floor.

"I ain't got the time ta learn ridin', fer sure. An' yer leave too much trail. But we've come this far, an' nobody's botherin' us, ya might as well sip one more creek with me." A pair of big ears flicked; Wolf supposed that might be a reply.

Lightly gripping the reins, Wolf walked down the slope, painfully conscious of the horse's big feet kicking up duff and dirt as they went. The tiny valley ahead of them might or might not be occupied; if so, there could not be many people there; it would not support them. In days gone by, it had been what Magee had called a "park" – places where a nation, or state, or some such thing, had declared that some pretty spot would be left unchanged "in perpetuity." Then, so that a steady stream of *cars* might bring people to look, a parking lot had

been built, and remarkably overbuilt little buildings, with a pit toilet in each one, and then perhaps a path to some kind of "overlook." This one, which Wolf had found a long time ago, had something to do with water falling over a rock face nearby; perhaps fifteen meters.

Whatever made people happy! For Wolf, the attraction had been isolation; the place was in a box canyon blocked by a mudslide, and a young jungle had covered the dead-end road.

As he neared the park, Wolf let go the reins, and watched the horse amble down toward what was left of what had once been a tiny lawn amid the giant fir trees. Much brush had grown up, but there was still grass, and, as the site was in shade much of the day, the dampness from the nearby creek had kept things relatively green. The horse picked about, seeking the best fodder, while Wolf, bow at the ready, watched the surroundings. If anyone had moved in, they'd spot the horse, and he, Wolf, could spot them.

After a suitable interval, Wolf felt safe enough to come down from the woods. He tied the reins to a sapling, in case the horse might try to go home, then cleared the buildings, one by one. Nothing to speak of in the toilets. Squatters would surely have used them, and had not done so; his spirits rose. He moved, pushing aside a thick growth of red alder and hazel, to the object of his journey: the maintenance building.

This was a squat concrete structure, steel-roofed and steel-doored, with a heavy-duty hasp. Wolf had spent the better part of a day getting the original padlock off, then found the spare hanging from a hook on the wall, with the key in. Retracing his steps, Wolf circumambulated the building, satisfying himself it had not been breached, then walked to a rail fence near what had been the parking lot. Setting his bow against a fence post, he hugged the top rail and hauled it back several inches, dislodging moss and ferns that had grown on it, until the end slipped from the slotted post. Reaching in, he found his padlock key. He picked up the bow.

Returning to the shed, Wolf unlocked the door and swung it wide. The hinges complained, but not too badly; the grease he'd applied had not all eroded away. He sniffed the dark interior, took two steps in, and waited for his eyes to adjust. The air was cool on his skin, but not too damp. Good; the roof had held. He set the bow against the wall, removed his quiver, and stepped over to the one closet door. Taking a deep breath, he flung it open.

Unlike at the gun store itself, the mother lode, here all was as he had left it. Wolf let out a long sigh. Mounted on one wall, tools. On another, weapons, gleaming in cosmoline. At his feet, a steel trunk which he had filled with waterproof ready boxes of ammunition and chunks of baked drywall. It was from here that he had outfitted himself with the AK, Glock and shotgun before recruiting his army.

He'd considered coming back with the men, to arm the lot of them, but ultimately decided against it. Control forty or fifty new soldiers, each equipped with the means to off him at a moment's notice? Better to get their complete loyalty first with a successful campaign.

Except ... the "training" campaign, which had begun well, had struck a snag – a valley full of cagey tribals intent on protecting their cabbages. He'd been bested, he had to admit.

And he had to acknowledge their way had a point. The room before him reflected his own skills, interests and outlook. But there were no cabbage seeds here; nor was there food of any kind. The strange people at Starvation Creek had been able to do something he, Wolf, might well never do. They had *settled down*. Some of the soldiers, and that was what they were, that had besieged his dwindling crew – had been children.

Ah, well. Wolf reached to the pegboard where a hacksaw –treasures of treasures! awaited him, then hesitated. Sawing off that effing chain would take time. Making these greased battle rifles, pistols and riot guns usable would take time, too. And he was vulnerable while doing either. Better hit the trunk first.

Raising the lid, Wolf feasted his eyes. Thousands of rounds of, he hoped, useful ammunition lay in the boxes – but on top of the heap, lightly buried in crumbled drywall, lay an item he had left at the ready, loaded, against need upon a more sudden return: a stainless pump-action rifle in three-fifty-seven caliber. This item alone, he knew, was worth a warlord's ransom in this world. Rich again! He reached for the burnished walnut stock protruding from its Kydex scabbard.

A commotion outside added sudden urgency to Wolf's gesture. Snatching the rifle from the scabbard, Wolf checked the chamber quickly and ran to the door. A high-pitched scream wafted up the creek – the horse! Broken loose? And now where? Around the bend. And there were other animals – or was that shouting? No, more like snarling. Checking perimeter first, Wolf left the building at an easy trot, dodging saplings and brush, bursting through to first one small clearing and then another.

The horse was in the middle of the second clearing, trembling, breathing stertorously, and bleeding copiously. Around it, circling cautiously, were five – seven? nine? large dogs, ranging in color from cream to gray. The biggest sprang toward the horse, almost playfully, from the front, and the Appaloosa reared, its front feet windmilling. As the feet came down, sinking with an audible thump into the grassy sand, the biggest gray fastened its teeth into the horse's nose.

Wolf, well knowing the dangers of advertising one's possession of a firearm in the avaricious wilderness, for once threw caution to the wind. He fitted the gun to his shoulder and fired. Though he knew the report of the pistol caliber would be relatively subdued in a rifle

barrel, the sound temporarily stunned him, as it did the animals. The leader fell to the ground, then got up and ran away, following the others. As Wolf pumped the next round into the chamber, he had the satisfaction of seeing the animal he'd shot fall to the ground again, and go into its death throes. Another, the cream-colored one, stopped to look at it, then gazed for a moment at Wolf accusingly. Reluctantly, it sprang away into the underbrush.



Wolf watched as the creature's struggles diminished, and listened for any return of the others. All was still, except for the labored breathing of his big companion. Wolf half-turned to it. "Be back in a second." He walked over to the pack leader, who now lay still, and prodded it with the rifle barrel. It looked like it was six feet long, though probably not. Long tail, thick mane. Oh. Wolves! He had never seen them before. He'd also never heard of wolves going after horses, but, he reflected, things might have changed since old times. He had to admit these animals had not been a common topic in the prison, despite his own name.

Time to look at the horse. Wolf retraced his steps. The Appaloosa stood, or rather ran in place, going nowhere and everywhere at once, as if unable to make up its mind what to do and also unable to do it. The spotted hindquarters quivered continually. There was damage to the back of the back leg on this side, and to the nose and lower jaw.

Still trotting in place, the terrified animal swung round. There it was – a bit of the guts exposed and gnawed. To his surprise, Wolf felt his knees and elbows go cold. With a shaking hand, he reached out and patted the big animal's shoulder. "Aw, shit, big fella. They've screwed you up good."

The Appaloosa stopped trotting in place, and stood looking past Wolf's shoulder. He had seen that look before – incomprehension beyond pain – but mostly in the faces of humans. And he had not much minded putting them out of *their* misery. For once, as Wolf stepped back and settled the rifle's stock against his shoulder, unaccustomed regret followed the curl of his finger round the trigger.

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Mullins strode along beside Lacey. "These things *do* check out. There are definitely people in that list'nin post up there; been watchin' us for days. An' the burnt-out tower matches Wolf's description."

Lacey did not break his stride, nor did his taciturn expression change. "Yes."

Mullins looked him over appraisingly. "Why do I get th' feelin' you're holdin' stuff out on me? You guys saddle up, ride around, gone overnight, come back, throw us a sack of venison, we ask for a report, you shrug and say "this is the place."

"We cannot go very near without giving away too much concerning ourselves. We have approached them at night, and we have seen they are vigilant. This can be a dangerous venture."

"Well, and here y'are, walking right at 'em w'me, unarmed, with a white 'flag.' Y'don't look worried."

"They have much at stake. They are on their own ground and have, we think, prepared positions. They could have attacked my scouts, and

have not done so. They will parley. Will you?"

"Well, sure, fer starters. Might learn somethin'. Hell, maybe we could get ourselves invited in."

"This is the bridge. We are now being watched. If we stay here, I think, no one will come out. But if we go forward, you will be hailed."

"Well, okay, let's do that and see."

They moved along what was now clearly a road that had been kept open. Mullins was not an experienced woodsman; nevertheless he began to sense, as Lacey had for some time, watchfulness. As they neared a heap of brush cuttings, sure enough, a man stood out from a copse of hemlocks in the near distance.

"Stop right there, please."

Mullins studied him. Tall, broad-shouldered, apparently short hair and beard; hard to tell as his face was shadowed by a wide-brimmed coolie hat of some kind. Dressed in leather, it looked like; with a broad belt. And was that a *sword* tucked in the belt? What were these people playing at around here?

The stranger said nothing more, but waited, in a posture both alert and relaxed.

Mullins spoke, keeping his voice low and his eyes on the man.

"Whaddya think of him?"

"Wave the flag."

"Oh, yeah." Mullins did so. The local made no sign or move.

"This man is experienced. There are others with him, and they will be armed. We are already within range. They have done this before."

"Tell me stuff I don't already know."

"They are hungry. Things have not gone well with them. This man has been losing weight for some time. He may also, I think, be recovering from a wound or injury."

"Well, *that's* information."

Clearly, the stranger was willing to stand in the early fall sunlight all day without speaking.

Mullins cleared his throat. "We, we come in peace for all mankind."

The tall man cocked his head. "Heard that one before somewhere. Y'all got a lotta nice gear out there in th' woods. Not much of it's peace-y lookin'."

"Travel is unsafe, y'know. We're the, we're the Yew Ess Army an' we're puttin' th' country back together. Goin' up an' down makin' folks aware the government's back in operation."

"That's nice."

Mullins waited for more, perhaps a rebuttal, but the man just kept right on standing there.

"Well, uh, can we parley, get some communications set up, explain th' laws an' get a representative an' all that? You c'n be your own county."

The man smiled briefly, then appeared to be studying the sky.

"Uh, tell ya what." Mullins set the end of his sapling flagpole on the ground. "We got food. Meals Ready to Eat. Salt. We got *salt*. If yeh've fallen on hard times, could bring th' trucks in, give ever'body a square meal. Show ever'body we're on th' level, an' all. What say?"

The man studied the ground, then the sky again, and then looked at Lacey for moment, then Mullins. "Your friend there got a tongue?"

"I speak for myself, yes," said Lacey, stepping forward.

"You two are from different outfits. Your pal there, I've seen his kind before. How come y'are doing his dirty work, sniffin' around us all night?"

"It is good to know something of one's surroundings."

"Yeah-h-h, guess it is. Listen —" he returned his attention to Mullins. "— best thing to do, pass on by an' act like y'never been here. Get your government set up, build some towns, do some *agriculture*. We'll talk some more in a couple years, 'k?" He turned to go.

"Well, hey, wait up!" But Mullins could see the interview was over. The stranger did not break stride, but disappeared behind the hemlocks.

Lacey turned to Mullins. "There is nothing more to do here at this time."

"Y'think maybe I shoul'da asked him direct 'bout th' power plant?"

"No." Lacey turned away and began walking back past the bridge.

Mullins, perforce, joined him. "Do y'suppose they even have one?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

Lacey stopped and regarded him. "One of my men may have overheard a conversation."

"Overh —" but Lacey had moved on again. Mullins trotted after him. "You *are* holding something back."

Lockerby appeared in the middle distance, rising from a patch of horsetails near the small river, with the Ay-Kay in hand.

"How'd it go, Mullo?" he called out softly.

"Tell ya in a bit." Mullins addressed himself to the striding tribal leader. "Look, we got a deal or don't we?"

"The Prinevilles carry out their agreements. I will tell you what I have heard but not how I heard it; as that is not in the agreement. There are not as many people as we were told. They are, however, clever in matters of farming, manufacture, defense. Yes, they have power. Yes, it is 'nuclear.' For many years they did not even know it was there. No, they will not negotiate; they believe they know who you are; it is only a guess, but in part they have guessed correctly, and they will not believe a cover story. They will resist any move on our part to occupy the mountain." He gestured toward Starvation Ridge.

By this time they had reached Lockerby.

Mullins turned toward Lacey again. "All right; ya don't wanna divulge your sources. Why'd ya go through that charade with me?"

"I wished to see this man. I believed he would show himself. He will be a worthy adversary for us; and his name is Wilson."

"His name is Wilson. Well, Mr. Walkin' Incyclepeedya Lacey, I'm not sure I trust ya now as far as I can throw ya; but I'm glad ya said *us* and I hope I c'n hold ya to it. Lockie!"

"Mullo."

"How long till the Cat could get up here?"

"To right here? Be about three hours."

"From where they are now, can th' cannon hit this area?" Mullin's gesture took in the woods around the rusted steel bridge.

"Mmm, yeah, an' the hilltops too; not much further. But there's no target we c'n be sure of hittin' square from way out there, or even from here; 'cept *that*." Lockerby pointed to the lookout on Ball Butte.

"Yeah, 'n it's a low-trajectory gun. I knew we'd rather be havin' a howitzer out here, or mortars. We can either bust through here to where th' LAV can see what it's doin', or take it up onto high ground. Mr. Lacey?"

"Yes?" The chief regarded Mullins impassively.

"You fellas have clearly looked – and *listened* – a lot; c'n the Cat get up there?" He pointed to Ball Butte.

"It is steep, except from the back."

Lockerby squinted at the hill. "They can see anything we do from there; if we could haul the LAV up there we can cover the whole valley. But they'll have thought of that. I like the other one better." He indicated Starvation Ridge.

"Ah, hell, Lockie, that one's just as bad."

"Only from here. We could drive up on it from the south, pretty easy."

"An' fight ever' inch of th' way. Mr. Lacey, th' man said "*keep goin'*", didn't he? How about we all pass 'em by, in full view, 'n let 'em watch us do it, then come back and hit that lookout at dawn – from th' north. Give 'em time to relax – say, about a week."

Lacey considered. "It seems good. But they would want to confirm our departure, and their scouts would trail the column. My men could make sure they would not return to report, but this will alert their people. Also, there would be no cover of darkness. In one week, there will be a full moon." He pointed to the half moon, already hanging in the late afternoon sky above the ridge.

"Well, then, whaddya suggest?"

"Let us divide our forces. Take the column south, in full view. Turn back on the third night and assault the Starvation Ridge. Darkness will fall, four hands before daylight. By sunrise, you can be well up the mountain, and your weapon will be able to cover you there."

"Uh huh, and what will your crowd be up to?"

"At midnight, we will take the lookout and make fire and noise. This will be to draw the attention of all the farmers, giving you time to make your ascent."

"A feint. I like it, Mr. Lacey, except what's to keep you from giving us the slip?" Mullins made a sign behind his back, and Lockerby stepped away, as if to pick a horsetail from the sand.

"We are a people of our word." Lacy braced himself, perhaps to leap upon Mullins and shield himself from Lockerby, but it was clearly too late; Mullins, too, was stepping away. The muzzle of the rifle came up and pointed itself toward the Eastsider's broad chest.

"Well, Mr. Lacey, *we* are a people of guarantees. I do like your suggestion, but I will amend it. You'll tell your folks to have a go at th' little mountain behind us, on schedule. But you yourself will go with *us*."

...

Wilson strode up from Hall bridge to the Mess Hall, giving the password to the young sentry as he came on. In his haste he forgot the counter word, and the child, one of the "grenadiers" who had served with Emilio Molinero in the New Moon War, was much too much in awe of Wilson to remind him.

Though it was already late in the day, Wilson had to pause for a moment as he entered Hall; the contrast in light, even in what must surely be September, was striking. Hall had been a sawmill or planing mill at one time, and had relied in those days upon powerful incandescent light bulbs for its workers to see by. Wilson wondered that it had occurred to no one to hook up the building, which was in constant use, to the power from Ridge; as it was, two cadres were grouped around windows. One crew was washing sunchokes from a largish pile in a washtub, gossiping among themselves; the other was clustered around his wife, Billee, who was putting them through dry-snap exercises with an array of antique twenty-twos. Dud, or dummy, rounds that had somehow been painted blue were scattered on the table.

"Hi, Cap'n," said one. Billee looked up and, spying him, beamed.

"Y'ah go right ahead with what you're doing there," said Wilson, forcing an expansive smile. "Gonna make a phone call." He continued on toward the cellar door.

Billee delegated the class to a relatively experienced young woman to her left – another of the grenadiers – and followed him.

In the command post, Wilson found Selk kneeling before the telephone desk, working by lamplight. "Good afternoon, Mr. Selk," he boomed, giving himself the guilty pleasure of watching the hunched figure jump. "I do hope your presence here does not mean that

communications are down."

Selk tucked his chin into his shoulder and peered round over the top of his glasses. "N-no, Mr. Wilson, I've hooked in here – " he held up the ends of two wires " – and we'll run a line out to Bridge; we're giving them your handset, though, so you'll have to make do for now with these." He set down the wires and held up a pair of headphones in one hand. In the other, he displayed what looked like a brass disk with two tiny, toothy long-snouted clips attached.

Wilson reached out and took them, gingerly. "What the hell?"

"Here, sit down, let me. *These* go over your ears, like this, and you hold this – When you want to talk, clip one of *these* on the lead, here, like this." He demonstrated. "Then, you want to listen, unclip. See?"

"I don't see. Does the doorbell still work the same?"

"It does, but never mind that; they're already talking."

"I don't hear anythin'."

Selk compressed his lips. "Sorry, impedance doesn't match. But some sound does carry if you're *quiet*."

"Yeah, yeah. Hush up yourself, then."

Billee, who had come in right behind Wilson, grabbed a cup, poured some water into it from a jug, added vodka from a spare lamp, and set it before Wilson, who picked it up without missing a beat.

Billee gave Selk an accusing look. "You were *eavesdropping*," she whispered.

"Wouldn't *you*?" he whispered back. "I'm out of here; got wires to spool out." True to his word, Selk picked up a small wooden spool mounted on a broomstick, and walked backwards out of the room, unreeling spliced lamp cord.

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Ellen Murchison held the handset away from her ear and winced, then pressed the button. *Click*. "Wilson, are you there? We're hearing the awfulest clicking and sputtering. Over." *Click*.

Static, then, "Yeah, s'me. Uh, th'techie has made a mess down here. Can you hear me? Uh, over." *Scratch*.

Click. "Yes, but why are you shouting? Over." *Click*.

Screech. "Sorry, the things on my ears, I can hardly hear ya, this other thing must work better." *Hiss*.

Click. "We'll take that line noise to mean 'over.' So, what happened out at Bridge? Over." *Click*.

Click. "I'm here, too, Wilson." Avery's voice. "Over." *Click*.

Crackle. "How much did y'all see? Uh, over." *Buzz*.

Click. "From here, everything," said Ellen. "Still lots to see. And we're relaying it all to Avery, of course. Over." *Click*.

Sizz. "Well, th' short guy is in charge, but he doesn't answer to th' description of th' guy that was here before. I think he's th'

expedition'ry leader. Th' tall guy with th' pigtails is interestin'. I'd say he knows more what he's about, but is deferring to th' little one like he's on contract to 'im. Can't see 'em gettin' along. ... Oh. Uh-h-h, over." *Bzzt*.

Ellen held the handset away from her head. "Neel, how's it look?"

Neel, one of her young charges, pulled himself away from the spotting telescope. It had arrived that morning, and he had been joyfully glued to it all day.

"Still headed for the trucks, ma'am."

Click. "Wilson, after you left, they went back beyond bridge and another short man with a *rifle* joined them. I'd swear it was an AK, like before. There was what looked like an amicable conference, then suddenly they took the tall man prisoner and away they all went, with the rifle at his back. Over." *Click*.

Pause. Another crackle, then Wilson whistling. "Wow, com-*pli-cat-ed*." Another pause. "So, anyway. This tall guy, I think he looked at me like you do when you've seen somebody before." Pause.

"Oh, *over*, arready." *Fzzt*.

Avery clicked in. "From these tidbits, I think we're looking at two groups that barely get along. It's a treaty of some kind. The LAV, the trucks and things, that's the Volunteers. And the guy they're holding is probably the leader of an auxiliary force. He's insurance. Sure you haven't seen horses? Over." *Click*.

Hsst. "No, but that doesn't mean they don't have them. That look that guy gave me? I think he's got the Bledsoes."

"Hunh," said Ellen to the stone walls. Neel swung round from the scope, and Elberd looked up from his own business, a half-plucked blackbird he had netted. She looked at their cheery, hopeful faces.

Damn. So young, too.

...

Aver Murchison drummed his fingers on the chart table, staring at the hole that had been drilled for the Osborne fire finder, which had been put away. Savage Mary was running late, as usual. Of course, she had long ago adopted Creek time, only more so, coming and going much as she pleased. He looked round the room. Coils of wire were stacked in corners, and all the sheet metal panels had been dismantled from the control consoles, making wheelchair navigation hazardous. Selk burning the midnight oil again, of course. Couldn't Mary reign the guy in and keep him focused on something *useful*?

Karen, more gangly than ever despite the now quite respectable bulge in her middle, came in through the doorway, dangling a long gunny sack in her hand. "Good morning, sir; have you had breakfast?"

"No, actually. Is there such a thing any more?"

She hefted the sack onto the table, then reached into it. Avery saw,

with approval, that she'd found a way to wear her gun belt again; a padded strap hung over her good shoulder and was clipped, front and back, to a wide belt that rode high, between her small breasts and large stomach. The little revolver and knife both rested on her left side, cross-draw, and, in the absence of a left arm, out of the way. The rig looked like a cross between a shoulder holster and an ALICE. Always thinking, this girl.

Karen drew a burnished steel bottle from the sack. "I *can* open this for you, but it takes time, so you can do your own honors." She drew out an oversized white mug, decorated with Santa Claus faces and Christmas trees, and set it before him.

Avery unscrewed the plastic lid and sniffed the contents. He wrinkled his nose. "Good grief."

"Sorry about that; it's beaver tail soup. Krall found a colony up the creek and Mr. Bolo and Mr. Josep brought home the lot of them."

"Oh, it beats nothing, and thank you. Having to spread the solids so thin worries me, though. This is more bouillion than soup; we can't really go through the winter on a liquid diet."

"No, we can't. But there it is; few crops and few animals this year."

"I have one trick left up my sleeve, but it will grieve me. Stick around for when your boss gets here, and you'll hear it. Want to sit down?"

"Oh. Not yet; I have something for you." She reached for the sack, then paused. "Mr. Wilson still has your Ruger, right?"

Avery sipped from the hideous mug. Hmh! *This stuff could grow on you, especially if you've skipped supper.* "Sleeps with it, I think. Why?"

"Well – " she rummaged in the sack and produced a leather bandolier, filled with black and red shotgun shells. "These are twelve gauge; we've stuffed the black ones with buckshot and the red ones with turkey loads. So, if you're clearing one of the hallways down below, you'll want black. There are five of them. For room defense, go with red. You get seven of those for now." She handed it over.

Avery spread the bandolier along the right arm of his chair. It would be perfect, mounted right there. "Wonderful. And these things are functional? How'd you solve the primers?"

"Well ... we wasted time trying to use some of our twenty-two casings, mounted in the bases, but found they weren't happy with the firing pins. But we've been remanufacturing the percussion caps for the BP guns, and Deela hit upon putting those in, instead. You might not have more than three misfires in the whole batch."

"I'll be damned. But, uh, what do I shoot them out of?"

Karen's hand was already back in the sack. She withdrew what Avery realized at once been the coach gun with which his mother, and others, had been shot in the New Moon War. The barrels were much

reduced in length, and the stock had been cut off at the pistol grip, then rounded off and even varnished. Karen thumbed the break, popped open the gun, checked the chambers, and then snapped her hand upward, closing the action with a flourish. She tossed it in the air, reversing it, and proffered it to him stock first.

"Wonderful and and wonderful," said Avery, taking the sawed-off from her. "All it needs now is a scabbard, and I'll be able to cross-draw just like you."

"As it happens," replied Karen, reaching into the sack. But a sound at the door captured her attention as well as Avery's.

Mary wheeled herself in. "Ugh. That must be the beaver fat I just heard about."

Avery smiled and took a sip. "The big man from Roundhouse – New Ames' now, am I right?" Karen nodded "– along with Bee, went to some risk to get it for us, so I for one will not knock it. Now that I've had some," he added, as Karen's eyebrow went up. "But you're here on a related matter."

"I am?"

"Mmm-hmm." Avery retrieved from the table a key on a ring. "I know Mrs. Molinero and Mr. Guchi are getting frantic, and just looking at Karen here, who is supposed to be eating for two, should give us cause for alarm. I've kept this on a hook in my quarters for years."

"Is that what I think it is?"

"Yes; the seed vault, bottom level."

Mary threw her hands in the air. "*Damn* it, kid. *Damn* it. word gets out, there goes th' Creek."

"There goes the Creek anyway, Dr. M. We have no means of surviving into next year unless we break into that store; it's wall-to-wall empty barrels on level three, and everyone already knows that; no one's talking about it, but they know. If we're to have the strength to get through this visit from the Rogue Valley Volunteers, we must *eat*." He pushed the key across to Mary. "Room 484, about 100 feet from the reactor."

"Uh, huh," said Mary, picking up the keyring and looking at it absently. "And how come this is being handed to *me*; shouldn't it just go straight to Juanita?"

"No one better than you to explain to her the problem inherent here. This seed cache is viable but it has had some exposure to isotopes. It could be construed to be radioactive food. We don't want to pretend otherwise, even though most of us here would have no idea what that means. So there's an educational component to breaking this stuff out."

"Sure. I tell her, 'look, here's your wheat. If y'all eat it, you might start glowing in ten years' time; but for sure you will starve to

death *next* year, so it won't matter."

"Something like that, yes. At any rate, you know the details much better than I."

"Right." Mary folded the keyring into her palm and dropped it in her bosom. As she turned to wheel away, she noticed the shotgun and bandolier on the table. "*Good Lord*, is that a twelve?"

"Yes'm," Karen nodded.

"You've really shrunk it down. Won't it have too much recoil?"

"It's black powder, reduced charge, ma'am. It's not too bad. Has to be cleaned up after, though." Karen pulled the scabbard from the sack and placed it before Avery, who broke the action, snapped the barrels back in place, and sighted down the room.

"I think I'm a mite jealous," remarked Mary.

"And here's yours. With two rounds of twenty-two." Karen fished out the final item in the sack, the ill-fated Derringer from Bledsoes with the ivory grips.

Mary accepted it, with a wry expression. "Hmh. *Still* jealous."

Avery put away the shotgun in its scabbard and held it up to Karen. "Do the honors?"

"Uhh, sure." Karen walked round behind his chair and, holding the scabbard in place with her knee, laced it onto the top bar and tucked it behind the little backpack that hung there. As she worked, a shy smile crept across her face. Mary noticed, and gave Avery a sidelong glance.

He was smiling too.

Hmh. "Well, I'm outta here, catch you two later." Mary wheeled away toward the corridor.

Karen stepped back. "How is it?"

Avery reached over his left shoulder and drew and aimed. "I'm in business."

"Good." Karen felt the room darken perceptibly. She drifted over to the window, her hand on her tummy. "Oh."

"What?"

"It's raining."

∴

Neel's nose was running, and he'd begun to shiver. The cave-like stone lookout was all right in summer, but as the days became shorter, he could feel the heat being drawn from his body. More, and better clothing would help. More, and better, food would help. Fire would help; but Mrs. Murchison had nixed fire. He gripped the rifle between his knees and tucked his hands in his armpits.

Across the room in the near-darkness, he could glimpse Elberd, in much the same condition as himself. Mrs. M had said for one of them to get some sleep while the other watched, but neither felt like sleeping and what was there to watch? The clouds had settled on the

hill, and the moon would not rise until well past midnight. One might as well cake mud on one's eyes and watch that.

Wait! Sound. Someone approaching the entrance. Stiffly, Neel unwound himself and found the stock, grip, and trigger of his weapon. He sensed Elberd doing the same.

"Word?" croaked Elberd, nearest the door.

"Tree," replied Mrs. M's voice, the one they wanted most in all the world to hear. Neel, in obedience to his training, removed his finger from the trigger and indexed it along the stock. "Word?" asked Mrs. M, near the entrance in the rain.

"Branch. Oh, Sergeant, we're ... "

"Shhhh!" She came in, her rain gear rustling, and made for the telephone table. "Elberd, go outside and if anything moves, challenge and be prepared to shoot. Neel, go over by the entrance and back him up. Quietly, quietly! Thank you both."

They moved quickly and as silently as possible, as she had trained them. Neel settled, just out of the rain, within the stone doorway, and watched the blackness, which gave him no more clues than before. He could hear Mrs. M. working the doorbell buzzer and the handset.

"Avery? Wilson? Oh, Karen. Is there an Avery nearby? Over. Yes, expedite! Thank you. Over. Who's this? Over. Hello, Guchi. Is Wilson in? Never mind, then, yes, bring Minnie downstairs, please, she'll do. Over. Oh, Avery. Yes, there's something going on here. Where are the people you sent? Over. Well, they're a good three hours overdue, so I think that makes our position here untenable, to say the least. Over ... Well, I'm thinking they've cut us off about halfway up the hill – what? No, we've heard no shots, that's the hell of it. With all the toys we've seen them waving around, and then seeing them march off ostentatiously around to your left, I'm thinking they've divided their forces and the long-haired ones have doubled back. Over. Yes, it could be a diversion, but that doesn't mean they don't want this hill. They could see your every move from here. Over."

Her rain gear rustled. "Neel, are you paying attention to Elberd?"

He hadn't been. "Yes'm."

"Step outside; he's wet, you might as well be."

"Yes'm." Neel took one long step forward; his straw hat began sagging right away, but it provided him some protection. Any other time, he might try to locate the other young man by calling out to him, but it seemed a good idea, this time, not to. Instead, he strained at the soft whisper of the night with all the might of both ears, till he located him by a shifting of weight on a wet boulder. Except that the sound did not seem quite right.

Neel eased the rifle forward and lightly touched the trigger with his finger. Barely above a whisper, he called out. "Word?"

Something popped against his thigh, like a wet towel being

snapped. Neel could hear someone running toward him, then falling down in the mud right at his feet. In what little light was available, the blade of a knife flashed out toward his legs. He leaped to avoid the knife, and aimed and squeezed the trigger of his twenty-two. But nothing came of that. He fell back against the stone wall of the lookout, frantically working at the bolt. Who was there? Another one?

With a much louder blast, the sergeant's revolver exploded right by his ear, and he felt himself jerked into the shelter. Neel sprawled on the floor, and saw, upside down, the flash of another blast from her gun. He heard his rifle, which he had somehow dropped, drag itself across the floor and land on his chest. The revolver tore another hole in the night, with an accompanying muzzle flash and lazily tumbling sparks. Were there shouts?

A twenty-two popped once, twice. Neel felt faint; his ears rang. He forced himself to work the bolt of his weapon, until the dud round fell out and another replaced it. He sat up, trying to see, trying to be of use. His right leg suddenly pained him. The thought of standing up struck him as unlikely.

Now all was quiet. Was he alone? No, there was ragged breathing.

The sergeant's voice rang out from quite nearby. "Elberd!"

"Ma'am!" Alive!

"Get *in* here!"

"Yes'm, where's *here*?"

"Eff. Neel, are you with us?"

"Yes'm."

"Is that thing working yet?"

"I think so, ma'am."

"Give me."

Neel held the rifle up and felt it snatched away. It banged once, up into the rain, and footsteps came running. Too many footsteps! The revolver lit up the night once more, and suddenly Elberd flung himself down beside Neel, wheezing.

A fierce whisper came from the darkness above. "Crawl around to the right, both of you! Hand me my rifle!" Neel complied; Mrs. M grasped it, worked the bolt action, and moved toward the doorway.

"Cover the entrance. Ask for the word from anyone coming in; if it's not me, shoot."

Neel propped himself up against the table and worked to catch his breath. He tried to ease the rifle down across his lap, but his right thigh bothered him too much. He set the butt down on the floor, with his hand on the grip, shifted his weight, and, reaching across with his left hand, explored his leg. There was an arrow shaft there!

It had almost missed him, but not quite. He tugged at the shaft experimentally, and quickly gave up that idea. Perhaps it could be pulled through from the other side. *We'll wait on that a bit.*

The crack of Mrs. M's more powerful rifle lit the night briefly. Immediately following, they could hear the bolt action opening and closing. She must not be far away.

Then the sky suddenly lit, to Neel's dark-accustomed eyes, horizon-to-horizon. The sky-light moved, and the outline of the stone hut's doorway crawled across the floor. Neel glanced at Elberd, and saw that Elberd's right cheek lay open, an almost perfect match to the long scar on his left cheek. Elberd's eyes were wide open with fright and wonder.

The excruciating brightness crossed the doorway and windows from right to left, and then, if anything, flared, silhouetting the forests of Maggie's Hill. And, as suddenly as the illumination had come, it ended, though a phosphorescence hung in the clouds.

A sound not unlike the summer's thunder came through the packed-earth floor into their cold bones.

"Dubya-tee-eff?" asked Elberd, whispering hoarsely.

"I'm not sure I even want to know," replied Neel, gripping his weapon and re-focusing on the doorway. "I'll watch here; you get some salve on your face and pull it together with some duct tape; then you turn around and watch the windows."

...

The rocks piled in front of Minnie-Min, which she had been touching from time to time to reassure herself they were still there, were slowly becoming visible. Moonrise; if the bad people were coming this way, there would be a chance of seeing them coming.

She'd been afraid she'd have to depend on her hearing, which she knew was not the best. And in rain, there was little one could discern against the white noise of the raindrops. This worked even against animals; earlier, a doe had walked across right in front of their position, and Bobbo had somehow put a bolt through it and tossed it, still struggling, over his shoulder to deliver to Ridge for the desperate cooks.

There was no keeping the unaccustomed cold out, even in her rain cloak. She shifted her weight time and again, feeling acutely the stobs of burnt brush and the small stones beneath her. The stones, she had to remind herself, were her friends; without them this would all be a slickery slope of ash-fouled mud, perfect for breaking an arm or a leg in a fall. Such injuries had always been a serious matter at Starvation Creek; it would be doubly true now.

There was a clatter off to the left; tremulously she gripped her twenty-two and called out. "Word?"

"Stock." It was Bobbo, returning. "Word?"

"Soup."

Errol, also to the left, spoke up. "Bobbo, you're coming down way left of your hole; let Minnie guide you over."

"Thanks; I got it. Min, just grunt a couple times, I'll go right by."

Suddenly the sky lit up, as if by lightning. Bobbo flattened himself, rolling a few more stones down onto Minnie, who crouched lower, wondering at the brightness. A weapon, a big one by the sound of it, cracked in the valley below – perhaps on the opposite side of the river – and the bright light arced across their position and disappeared over Ridge. "What ... ?"

"Shhh!" Bobbo began scrambling as soon as the darkness came. "Watch and listen! And stay down!"

Another light came streaking toward the mountain. This time there was a burst of flame, accompanied by a shower of big sparks, just over the swell of the ridge to the left. The ground trembled; this was followed by an explosion, not like anything Minnie had ever heard.

Here it came again! This one, she could see, would come closer. Instinctively she nestled into her rockpile, knocking her rain hat askew. The bright flying object shrieked as it came near, then clanged into the hillside, near Errol, she thought. Sparks rose into the rain, guttering out as they arced away from the point of impact, and one larger spark bounded into the air, illuminating the whole hillside as it hummed off over Ridge. What *were* these things?

Another sharp crack in the valley told her another of the lights was coming; she closed her eyes, then opened them – one must be ready for anything; and was she not a lifelong soldier of Ridge? This time there was a terrifying crash to her right, and bright blobs sputtered off overhead. Something pinged, like an arrow, on the boulder to her left and clattered into her hole. She might have reached for it, curious, but a strange smell, like and yet unlike the black powder with which she was familiar, wafted to her nostrils. Oh! it would be hot. Of course; these exploding things had metal casings. If she were out in the open when one burst, she could be cut down, as if with a bullet.

Two more of the things flung themselves at the hill, off to her right. And now – was that someone slipping in the mud, somewhere in front of her rockpile?

"Word?" That was Errol, to her left.

The unmistakable sound of a crossbow replied, quickly followed by the sound of a bolt caroming off rock.

Minnie could not see, over the rim of the boulder, who had fired, but she presumed there would be more than one intruder; if she stood up to shoot she might take flanking fire. Better to leave Errol's adversary to Errol for the moment. Sure enough, through the night came the unimposing "thwack" of his own twenty-two being fired. Someone, in front of her and downslope, grunted and swore. Minnie took this moment to shift onto her haunches and peer ahead, trying to

see in three directions at once.

The big gun cracked again, and as the yellowish light traced across the valley, she could see three men silhouetted against the light. They were sheltering from Errol, but had, apparently, not yet found her. She could feel her pulse racing in her neck as she aimed at the nearest and squeezed the trigger.

Nothing. Nothing, Jeeah!

Oh, the safety! She tried to remember what Bee had taught her. Push along receiver with right thumb – yes! She aimed again. This time the hammer fell with a click that came to her through her hands, but nothing else happened. *Eject!* They were noticing her now, and crabbing around on the slope to avoid her shot and perhaps get off a few arrows. Minnie worked the bolt and shouldered her weapon again. The ground rumbled beneath her as a shell from the big gun struck well away to the right somewhere. At the same time she fired. Someone else did so, as well – Bobbo?

"Get up! Get up there. Get 'em!" shouted someone. One of the opponents?

"I'm shot!"

"Can you move?"

"Yeah."

"Well, if you ain't dead yet, go effin' *get* 'em!"

Though she did not care to be discussed as someone to "get," these people did not sound any better organized than Creekers to Minnie. She worked the bolt again.

Errol, Bobbo and Minnie fired almost as one. The twenty-twos were beginning to have an effect. Instead of rushing, the invaders were scrambling away down the slope. It was *this* easy?

An arrow or bolt clattered off the rock right in front of her; Minnie ducked, shifted to her right, and slowly peeked over the rim again. She'd wait for the next cannon blast to work the bolt action; no point advertising her exact position.

But the big gun seemed to think it had done enough for now. She strained at the deep gray night with her eyes and ears. Something was going on well to the left, where several of the Roundhousers were; more small rifles were popping, someone was shouting, and there were clubbing noises. She ached to go help, but realized she might well do more harm than good anywhere but here. At least in this spot she had *some* chance of distinguishing friend from foe.

Now something was happening on her right; a wrestling match on the mountainside. A body or bodies rolled away below her, grunting. A man screamed. Someone was running or climbing toward her. Minnie worked the bolt. A shadow rose up in front of her. She fired.

"Unh!" said the shadow as it fell away.

Was that Bobbo's voice?

She'd better risk checking.

"Word?" she croaked.

"Uhh ... uhh, soup? Stock, stock!"

"Oh *Jeeah*, Bobbo, did I effing shoot you?"

"Unh. Nemmind. They're right here. Keep shootin'!"

Numb, yet obedient, Minnie loaded the chamber and stood up. Vaguely, before her, lay two bodies, both twisting in agony. One was clearly Bobbo. The other had something protruding from his abdomen. Approaching from below were two men she felt sure were armed with bows. The cannon spoke again, and she knew for the first time the terrible nakedness of the illuminated target.

Aim, fire. Load. Aim, fire.

Something caromed off Minnie's temple and her eyes filled, briefly, with red and blue sparks. Was she falling? Yes, she supposed she was.

∴

"Karen, let's get off this level for awhile." Avery scooped the remaining shotgun shells into his lap and wheeled around the table. "Now!"

Karen stood, stunned at the brilliance of the moving light. What was that?

Avery was speaking again. "*Move* it; they're ranging on us with a chain gun; it can hole us here. You take the stairs; I'll take the elevator."

Karen shuffled, so as not to trip over any of Selk's gear, and exited the command center into the lit hallway. Grasping the strange coolness of the stairwell's tubular handrail, she made her way cautiously down to the landing, turned, and followed the rail down onto the main level of Ridge. The elevator door opened next to her as she reached the corridor; Avery rolled out, loading shells into the sawed-off.

There was an unaccountable odor of blood and shit in the air.

Drawing her revolver, Karen began clearing rooms. As she came to the refectory, she discovered the cause of the odor. Juanita and Guchi, aided by Marleena, were gutting a freshly killed deer.

Guchi was facing her. His eyes widened a little at the sight of the revolver; she holstered it. "Sorry – didn't know it was a deer."

"We'll run the fans. Bobbo brought it."

"Isn't he on the south line?"

"Yeah, he just couldn't pass up bringing in food. Lotta hungry people downstairs."

Avery rolled up to the door. "Makes sense. No eat, no fight." To Karen he said, "Stay here and watch the south stairwell. I'll go back and hang out by the north stairs. Anybody from below, send them back down. Anybody from above, shoot."

"Understood." Karen leaned against the doorpost. She drew again and indexed her trigger finger along the Sentinel's frame, pointing the business end at the floor. From time to time she glanced at her friends, but mostly she watched the far doorway and the empty stairwell beyond.

Vibrations, no doubt from distant explosions, pulsed in the concrete floor. The food crew paused in their task, looking at one another anxiously, and then, as there was nothing else they could do, fell to work again.

Juanita, though easily the smallest person present, was the busiest. She drew the intestines and gave them to Guchi in a mixing bowl. He went with it into the kitchen.

Juanita picked up a skinning knife. She made quick work of the hide, as Marleena, also no slouch in the deer-dismantling business, turned the body this way and that for her, holding up the front legs at one point and the back legs at another. She took away the hide to another table and rolled it up.

Juanita cleaned and stropped the knife, set it aside, and picked up a crosscut handsaw. "We will put everything but the hide into stock pots. Guchi is washing out the colons, and so we will put that in as well. Later, when the hide has been scraped, we will make yet another soup with that."

"Of course," replied Marleena.

At the sound of her voice, a cardboard box set against the wall wobbled. The wail of a hungry baby filled the room. Marleena smiled and crossed the room to the box. She stooped and lifted out Marcee's orphaned Arda, who had grown more than Karen expected. Karen tore her eyes away from the infant and watched the stairwell. When she thought her duty could risk another peek, she found Marleena sitting in a nearby chair, her smock open, with the baby at her breast.

Karen couldn't believe what she was seeing. "Is that ... do you ..."

Marleena smiled again. "It happens sometimes. When there is great need."

Arda let the nipple slip for a moment with a smack of her tiny lips, cooed to it, and went back to work.

Karen's baby kicked. Hard. And again. The child seemed to be trying to scramble around in a circle. Karen felt a wave of – not so much pain, something more like strength. The wave seized her, beginning at her waist and rolling down. Her knees felt like water, and she briefly experienced tunnel vision.

Better holster the gun and get a grip on this door! Oh, for two hands!

Karen took several deep breaths, as Dr. Marcee had taught her. As her vision cleared, she found Juanita and Marleena both observing her closely. Then they looked at each other. Marleena nodded. Juanita had

been sawing away at the doe's backbone. She left the saw where it was, dipped her hands in the water bowl at the end of the table, and, wiping her hands on her apron, hurried over to Karen.

"Would you like to sit down?"

"No, I ... I'm on watch."

"Nonsense. Mr. Yamaguchi!"

Guchi popped his head in from the kitchen. "Almost done!"

"Never mind that; clean your hands and come in here; we need you to spell Karen in the hallway."

"Understood. Right away!"

Guchi shortly came into the refectory, doffed his apron, and gathered up his bow and sword. Juanita guided Karen toward a chair.

"Nita," asked Karen, "Mind if I don't sit? I want to be on my knees and sort of rest my head on the chair seat, I think."

"Sensible girl," said Marleena, who now had Arda over her shoulder and was thumping her gently on the back.

Juanita helped Karen kneel. "But of course. Our Karen is a sensible girl."

"I think there's going to be another one. And I feel like I'm going to throw up." Even as she said this, Karen could feel the distant explosions, less frequently now, rumbling in the bones of the mountain beneath her hand and knees.

"Let's get you out of all this war gear. You will not need it for awhile, I think. Here is a bowl. And a wet towel. And now you just rest, Karen. You are in the best hands on Starvation Creek, yes?"

∴

Lockerby climbed out of the driver's hatch and hopped down to the ground. There was a gray illumination provided by the faint beginnings of dawn. Men of the Volunteers were gathered around Mullins, and a row of bodies, by the look of things, lay on the ground. Stretching to ease the stiffness of a night shift in the LAV from his bones, Lockerby ambled over. "What we got?"

"Not so much." Mullins, scratching at his beard, shook his head.

"Jahn, catch Locky up."

Jahn, a rangy long-jawed fellow with an accent Lockerby couldn't place, stepped over.

"These folks have workin' rimfire ammy-nition; they's shooting us up wi' twenty-twos f'm cover."

"I hoped maybe they'd break and run from the barrage."

"Naw, they've fought afore."

"A legacy from Wolf. So, how bad was it?"

"We had four killed and eight are wounded, n' that's includin' me." Jahn held up his arm, which had been tied with a bloody rag. "We got

one man, ain't dead yet but will be, had this stuck through 'im." With his other hand, he held up a small sword.

"Damn. Well, we can't have that, twelve out of fifty-six. Did we do them any damage?"

"Hard to tell in th' dark; they hauled away dead 'n wounded as they went along; we didn't find but two."

"Let's see them."

Jahn indicated the right end of the line of bodies. Lockerby hunkered down to examine them in the gathering light. One was a large man, the other a woman, both with shaven heads and strange clothing – homespun-looking stuff, with rain capes of some kind of woven fiber, like basketry. Much like the Eastsiders, but not so given to adornment. The man had been shot with a small caliber weapon; friendly fire? He also had been slashed and cut about the face, arms, and hands. The woman had been hit a glancing blow in the right temple with a bolt or arrow, but had bled profusely from the mouth. Lockerby pulled down the jaw and looked in. "Shot in the roof of the mouth?"

"Well, she'd been out cold. Came to as we come up on her and – bam. took 'erself out 'fore we could stop 'er."

"Refusing to be a captive. Hard core. A waste, she was good looking. They'll come in handy, though. Keep the clothes, maybe we can do a ruse or something with 'em. Got any guns?"

"Yes, suh. One. Done give it to Mr. Mullins here, suh."

"Check it out, Lockie." Mullins had leaned it against a tree.

The rifle was a bolt-action twenty-two el-ar of the tube-fed magazine type; a plinking gun from the previous century, wooden stock and all. Lockerby picked it up, pulled the magazine follower and poured five shiny copper cartridges into his hand. Each one had been sealed around the rim with something lacquer-like. One looked slightly crooked. "Remanufactured?"

Mullins nodded. "Someone up there knows how to make primer – and powder. Black, from the smell."

"We got problems."

"That's not all. While you were in the LAV playin' wi' th' chain gun, we about run out 'a water from th' trucks. I sent th' reserves down to th' river to get some more, and one of 'em drank some and got sick. Real sick. Don't know if we can use it."

"Oh, it's that blue slime. Not flushed out yet."

"Yeah, it's still pretty low."

"It was a hot summer, Mullo. Think we can find any wells?"

"That's th' kicker," Jahn put in. "They's a place a'tween here an' th' mountain, out in th' open, that was burnt down not too long ago. We found th' well. It's in th' line of fire but we hoped t' go use it at night? ...well, somebody's th'owed in a buncha old antifreeze."

Mullins scowled. "Lockie, y' suppose we oughta pull back and fort up a bit? I'm running plumb out of ideas here."

"Well, sir, we've got to go to water. That river over there where the farmers are is almost dry, bad as here, I expect; they must be on wells in there."

"Th' big river, then. Send somebody to let th' tribals know, an' we'll backtrack to there."

"That steel bridge over by the entrance to the valley, we could fortify that. Room for all of us."

"Well, didn't you say it was bad water there too?"

"Another week of rain, probably not. We could truck in some water till then."

"Yeah, but I don't like havin' em upstream from us."

"True; if I was them I'd dam up and then let go a flood. Well, the map shows a bigger river than either of these, out past the big knob. That's closer than the main stem."

"Where the Eastsiders went up? I'm guessin' they just may have made their objective. 'K, let's truck in some water real quick, then go north. Send Jahn here to tell the Eastsiders to hold their hill till we get there, maybe four days behind 'em. We'll shoot up th' whole valley till they effin' cry uncle."

Lockerby turned to Jahn. "Jahn."

"Lockerby."

"Got all that?"

"Yes suh."

Lockerby reloaded the little rifle. "Take this; it'll maybe hold off anybody you meet on the way there. Don't lose it, though. Right now we've got three guns and a cannon. Who knows what those starving farmers have got?"

:::

Even though Elsa Chaney had consciously chosen to create a scratch religion of Gaia, whom the Creekers had gradually renamed Jeeah, she more than half believed in it herself. As she washed a stock pot, she mused: does one pray to Jeeah? Does she answer? She had taught otherwise: honor Jeeah by keeping the earth clean, not by pietistic religiosity. Marleena, she knew, prayed to an Our Father, but that was a remnant of the religion so popular with the very people who had built those power plants which were now melting down all over the sad and neglected earth. The same people had made the terrible last great war. God, or Jehovah, or Allah, whatever they called him, she'd had it with him. She'd seen his effects in the religious after-war of the Klux, They, while massacring the remaining population of of Eugene, had invoked him.

How would one pray to Jeeah? And why? Elsa knew enough of

nature to understand: one seed grows, another doesn't. This is determined by circumstance, not fiat. Hence she did not truly believe in miracles.

But it would be lovely to have one now.

That ragtag army ranging around out there seemed likely to finish off the little world of the Creek, if famine did not do so first.

She looked over at Tom, asleep on a cot against the wall. He had become very frail. His mind was wandering; no doubt hers was too. But he had a specific excuse; he'd self-diagnosed himself with cancer.

"Likely it began in my bones," he'd told her. "Strontium, of course. And I think has lodged in the brain, and elsewhere. As we both know, and so do Mary and Ellen, the principal value of this place is that it had a low click rate on the Geiger counter, for whatever reason. A trick of the winds in days gone by. But our generation, and many of the young, are from elsewhere. We have in us enough cesium, strontium, uranium, and even plutonium to explain many kinds of cancer and leukemia, as well as the mutations and deformities we have seen."

She had wept. He had held her. Smiling, he'd added: "I have lived about as long as one does, now, and it's been, on the whole, a good life. And I have lived it with you."

Billee came in, with Krall at her heels, breathless and flushed. "Where is Doctor Tom?"

Elsa resisted the impulse to shush her. He'd resent the protection, she knew. She gestured toward the cot, where he stirred at the sound of his name.

Billee bit her lip, but Elsa could see that great need had brought her. "Come over and we'll ask him." Elsa set the pot on the counter and accompanied Billee and Krall to the far wall. Tom, moving very slowly, had raised himself up and was feeling for the floor with his feet. Elsa knelt and helped him into his slippers.

"Doctor Chaney?" Billee began, but, seeing his condition, stood in momentary confusion, wringing a blood-soaked cloth in her sooty hands.

Tom lifted his eyes to her face, then dropped them to note the red rag. "So, our next little war has begun."

Billee nodded.

"Mangled bodies and what not. I might not be able to do much, myself, but if you can get me to wherever everyone is, maybe I can kibitz a bit. You're not hurt yourself?"

Billee, still biting her lip, shook her head.

"I am glad; a blithe spirit should not be blotted out. Help me up, and I'll shuffle along on your arm. Coming with us, my dear?"

"I am, love. I'll get your other elbow."

They proceeded slowly toward the corridor. People ran past the

doorway. Tom turned his head toward Billee. "Are the enemies within the gates?"

"No, sir. We've been pushed off Ball Butte for now, I think, but the attack on Ridge seems to have – 'petered' out, as Captain Wilson would say."

"'Captain,' now. Good title for him."

Billee blushed. "Yes, sir."

Elsa noticed the blush. Even in times like these! Youth is irrepressible.

They came to the elevator, which appeared to be in use. They waited their turn. Krall, still at Billee's side, sat on her haunches.

"What time is it, about?" asked the Doctor.

"About a hand past sunrise, sir," replied the girl.

"Mmh. How is Karen, do we know?"

"Juanita and Marleena decided to go ahead and break her waters, because the contractions haven't stopped."

"Is she still strong?"

"So far so good, sir, and she's about three fingers open now, sir."

"I had hoped it was not labor. Too soon. We don't have much to offer a preemie."

"No, sir."

The door opened. Emilio stood in the elevator with two pale youths – Elberd and the Perkins boy. Elsa remembered vividly Karen's sewing up of Elberd's right cheek in the New Moon War; and here he was with a taped-up wound in his left cheek. It would need attending to; she could see that. "May we join you?" she asked.

Emilio made room. "Yes, please. We are all going to the same place."

As Emilio pushed the button for the third level, Elsa turned to Elberd. "I bet you were in the thick of it this time."

"Yes, ma'am. Or, yes, we have been, but I got this one stupidly too."

"War is stupid, young man."

"Yes, ma'am, but, I mean – I was on guard and somebody got behind me in the dark to cut my throat – and I never heard 'em – and I was licking my rifle barrel and the knife slipped on it – and that's how I got cut up here." This outpouring ended in a small sob.

"The fact that you got out of that alive speaks for itself."

"Um, yes'm."

Something in the young man's expression made the back of Elsa's neck grow cold. "Where's Ellen?" she asked, her throat closing behind the words.

Both of the young men burst into tears.

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Karen felt she knew what it must be to be at the bottom of a well. Voices, when they came, seemed far above her, and echoed. What was that again?

"Too much effort in your face. Your face cannot push, you know." That would be Juanita. A hand patted her ribs, below her breasts. "Push here. Push like you are on the potty bucket, but *hard*."

Dry mouth. "Trying."

"Trying is nothing. You must move the whole world. Rest a bit. Breathe. Breathe again. Breathe again. See, they're coming closer together. One more breath. Let a bit out. Now, squeeze. Relax the face, relax the arm. Do it with everything below!"

"Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmh!"

"You are a funny girl. Rest a bit."

"Not funny."

"Okay, not funny. But strong, strong! So here you are again. Muscle, you are one big muscle. Move the world. Relax the arms. Pu-u-u-ush!"

"Mmmmmmmmmmmh!" Gasping for breath. "Gonna tear?"

"What is that? No big thing, we sew you up. You will just push. Once more, I think; rest. Breathe. Breathe again. Breathe again. Strong!"

Why did she keep saying, "strong?" Surely a weaker person never lived. These storms, she was completely in their power. No way out. No way out. "I think I bit my tongue."

"See, too much face," Juanita chided. "You wrinkle it up and turn red, like a dried tomato. Here is a damp cloth. Sip a little, then bite down. Here you go. Marleena has your hand. I am seeing a lovely head. Breathe. Let out a little bit. You will push now with everything, from the ribs down. You are an upside down bottle. Pour yourself out to the earth."

"To Jeeah. Out to Jeeah."

"Yes..." said Marleena. "... give yourself."

Karen pushed until the stars came out behind her eyes.

∴

"Is everyone here that can be here?" Emilio, who might just have not slept in three days, pinched his nose and rubbed at the inside corners of his eyes. It was a very uncharacteristic gesture, and brought everyone to full attention.

"I think so, sir," Tomma said softly.

"Then I think may be we can begin. Do we have the map from Hall?"

"Yes, sir." Tomma and Vernie stepped to either side of a table at one end of the long room. They raised up a plywood sheet, with posterboard pasted on it, and leaned it against the wall. Most of their world had been hand-drawn here: a map of Starvation Creek and the surrounding hills, with all the old farms and the specialties listed. The one thing that had been done to bring it up to date was a red line through Ridge, Creek, and Maggie's Hill. Everything to one side of that line had been burned over by the Great Fire, including the Orchard; much of what remained on the other side of the line had had to be abandoned after the depopulation of the New Moon War and the pandemic.

Those in the room, the very old, the very young, the disabled, and the walking wounded, drew near. Some brought folding chairs, others sat on the floor, forming a semicircle round the table.

Everyone had had so much to do in the last year that they had most of them passed the map, in its former location on a dimly lit wall of the Mess Hall, many times without giving its relative obsolescence much thought. Seeing it now, with its yellowing paper and faded image, by the harsh light of the halogen lamps on Ridge Three, was sobering.

Emilio picked up a thin brass curtain rod from the table and used it as a pointer. "We have before us an army by which, in terms of available fighters in the short term, we are outnumbered. They are of two kinds, perhaps allies. They are armed principally by means of a fighting vehicle with a large gun, as we have all seen. Also bows, crossbows, and some edged weapons. We have observed at least one rifle, which appears to be of the kind that was used against us before. But it has not been brought to the battle and is perhaps being held in reserve, or for internal security. Nothing can be assumed, however.

"Those who have attacked here – " he pointed at Ball Butte " – are, we think, Eastsiders. They match descriptions we have on record, confirmed by Mrs. Allyn's account. They may be thought of as cavalry – horse soldiers. On this army's approach, they were seldom seen, but are more numerous than we thought – riding horses, they scouted ahead, secured the flanks, and formed the rear guard.

"They have captured Ball Butte and ..."

A murmur arose. Hands waved. Mrs. Perkins stood up. "Where are our people that were up there?"

Emilio leaned back against the table. "The two young men have returned within our lines. They were both hurt, but not too badly."

"So, Ellen ..."

"Has not been found. Captain Wilson and Maggie are leading an effort to regain that high ground and to determine the whereabouts of Mrs. Murchison."

The shock was profound. Silence fell; the crowded semicircle

seemed to Emilio to shrink visibly, as if everyone sought the strength of shoulders to either side. Billee, who was sitting with her legs out straight, leaned back against a concrete pillar. She took a deep breath and held it, so as not to weep aloud. Krall laid her great head in Billee's lap and whined.

Emilio addressed the assembly. "This is like the Great Fire; conflict also consumes what it will until it has run its course. Skill and perseverance count for much, but to none of us is there a guarantee of long life and easy days. It may be we will see Mrs. Murchison again. Should that be so, she will wish to hear that we have used our skills well, and that we have persevered. Is that not so, Mr. Murchison?"

All eyes turned to Avery, Ellen's son.

"She'd tell you all what she always told me," said Avery, his voice steady. *'Go get some.'*"

"It is so." Emilio pointed to the area between Murchison's farm and the summit of Ball Butte. "A relief crew was on its way to the lookout last night, and we have lost contact with them ... a young man from Gulick's and two from Roundhouse. There are signs of a struggle. We do not know the outcome. These enemies are a very saving people; they retrieve arrows if they can find them. They recover all equipment and bodies, and they habitually cover their tracks."

A woman from Gulick's stood up, not far from Mrs. Perkins, who had not sat down. "Why are we even doing this? The farms are *gone*, you tell me my cousin's dead –"

"Missing," put in Vernie.

"Dead, thank you very much! He and I grew up here, it's our home, but for what? We can't grow food while fighting! We should just all pack up like the Bledsoes and scatter!"

"You have a point," said Avery rolling his chair forward, "And it's one that has been discussed every year since the Creek was established. Let's get Emilio's entire report – and mine – and then, if you like, we'll call a quorum and see if we have a sense of the Creek on that."

The woman glared, but subsided. Yet clearly the mood of the room was with her.

Emilio, seemingly unperturbed, pointed to the scrawled rectangle that represented Bridge. "As usual, our strongest preparations have been made in this area. For the second time in a row, our assailants have declined to test us here."

He tapped the map in the place marked with a farmstead and outbuildings which all present knew to be now occupied by ruins and weeds: Lawson's Freehold.

"Once again, an attack has been made upon Ridge from this vicinity. We have a full account from Mr. Errol, of New Ames, who is in the infirmary, that some twenty to thirty men – bald like ourselves

—" he forced a hollow chuckle — again, some using bows, but mostly crossbows — made their way up Ridge from this vicinity under cover of fire from the large weapon and engaged those of us who had formed a line there.

"From speech overheard during the fighting, and from details of clothing and equipment noted on the battlefield, as well as the appearance of bodies which we were able to recover, we feel there is reason to believe these are much the same people as we encountered last year. We think, from blood trails, they also carried away some wounded and some dead. It may be hoped we hurt them much.

"However, we also have a number of people hurt, including Mr. Errol, and two missing. We have brought in three dead, a young woman from Josephs and two men from Roundhouse. But our line has held and was reinforced and resupplied under cover of darkness."

Mouths opened. Emilio raised his hand, palm out. "We will best speak fittingly of our dead when we have time to draw a proper breath. Mr. Josep has taken over on the south slope of Ridge; his runner informs us that the attackers have withdrawn across the South River —" Emilio indicated the Calapooia —" and are marching once again." He drew an arc on the map with the tip of the curtain rod toward Bridge. "Why they are shifting we do not know. They do not appear very dispirited; so we may anticipate more activity, at Bridge perhaps, or at Ball Butte.

"We have the interior lines. As they march, so may we, point for point. Ball Butte is a matter of concern. While they hold that high ground, they command the Creek. We wonder that we have not already been fired upon from there. Hence Captain Wilson's maneuver. Mr. Avery, sir."

Avery wheeled round to face the audience. "As we all know from our flat and rumbling tummies, it has been a lean stretch and likely to get leaner. When the Department of Defense cleared out this valley and ran, "Jeeah" knows where and to what end, they left an opportunity behind in the form of Carey and Ellen Murchison, Sgts., USMC. The Murchisons were equipped to assess that, due to a trick of the winds, or whatever, we're not as salted with radioactive isotopes, and other problems, as some of the surrounding country. So they were able to pull together a community, enough, they hoped, to farm. But it takes more than we ever recruited, or more of a second and third generation than we were able to produce, to stabilize at a defensible and sustainable population.

"Think of all the things that didn't go wrong! War held off, cold held off, flood held off, drought and heat held off, fire held off, and crop failure held off, just enough, for twenty-two years, for us to pretend life was some kind of normal. It's not, out there, and not so much in here, either. Even with *this* —" he gestured at the blazing

lights "– which is a thing likely unheard of nowadays, there's little to go on.

"The Pilgrims trudged past us all that time, and we did what we could to make Creekers of some of them. They had known terrible privation. Some of their companions fell to diseases, which was why we had strict quarantine. Some had starved. Some had tried to farm, and their crops had made them sick. Some were too radioactive, themselves, for us to recruit. The poison comes from everywhere, mostly in the rain and snow. Savage Mary tells me if we were to show up among the people of Old USA and be tested, they'd have declared *us* poisonous.

"It's not that we're afraid of danger here. It's more we have some notion of the likely rate of return on scattering out. Wherever the Bledsoes could have gotten to – and some of us think they've met our 'friends' outside – they would likely have found little safe to eat, less safe to drink. Port Land bars the way north toward cooler lands; hostile opportunism on an even greater scale than these bandits and better organized, from what Mr. Josep tells us. If we got so far as the Canucks, why would they welcome us? We have heard them explaining, on their radios, how to dispose of any Pilgrims who get that far. And radiation is an issue even for them."

Avery looked round the room, meeting as many eyes as met his. "The truth is, it's worth hanging on here until it isn't. If we cannot sweep the barbarians from the gate, I'll recommend the Farms pack up and choose their directions. We are too many to all stick together in a wilderness, unprovisioned. If we can defeat them, there's still a crop, of sorts, to get in. We have clean wells and irrigation. The Creek might yet be a gamble we could win." He reached over his shoulder and drew the sawed-off shotgun, indexing his finger along the barrel, and pointed it at the ceiling. "Have a go?"

"I will," said one of the Roundhousers. "My kin brought me here over my objections, but they were right to do so; though we loved our home it was becoming a death trap. Here there may still be some hope, the Lord willing."

Billee was on her feet. "Hey, count on me! Krall too."

Krall swept her tail at the sound of the name, and the Roundhousers laughed to see the bond between a dog of their people and a woman of the Creekers.

Vernie held up the Creek's only known example of a Hawken rifle in his left hand. On his bare arm, the scars of his wounding in the New Moon War gleamed in the light. Tomma, across the map from him, held up the Creek's only Lyman rifle in his right hand. Tomma yelled out. "Yeah, Creek!" Vernie looked across at him quizzically, much as if to say, what, you can't come with anything better than that?

But it seemed enough for the room. Many stood up and shouted

Tomma's words.

Avery crossed eyes with Emilio. Emilio was not smiling, but he seemed moved. *Shakespeare, we're not*, thought Avery. *But we mean about as much.*

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Wilson had had misgivings about sending on a scout alone. But Maggie had insisted, and now her crewman had not returned.

"We'll be sticking together till we know more. I'll go point, you cover me with Bess there —"

"S'a Kentucky but it has no name," she replied sourly.

"Yeah, your rifle there. Range about a hundred?"

"More; I make my own Minié balls, young man. But here in the woods, figure it out."

"Mm-hm. Everybody on your right and left, and a 'tail-end Charlie,' as Avery says, in case of envelopment."

"Fancy word. Never mind, we all have your wide ass covered."

"... Right. So, up to th' saddle, n'I'll hang a left toward th' lookout."

"Fine." She waved the rifle, giving to the gesture that universal meaning: go ahead, chatterbox.

Wilson winced inwardly. It had always been thus with Maggie; 'Savage' might have been a better label for her than for Mary, whose acid tongue was equal-opportunity. Mary would highlight her own foibles as well as those of others. Maggie's competence no one doubted, but she did often return the favor.

Grasping his spear and loosening the Old Army in its holster, he turned to go, leaving his rain cape open at the front. Everyone was still "geared up" for weather, though the worst of it had passed for now. The Great Fire had not come here, and the dense green vegetation dumped ice water on one at the merest breath.

Wilson worked his way up to, over, and around stumps, root wads, windthrown logs, and the occasional boulder. This was a south slope, but it was not open country; and in two hands' travel he despaired, at this cautious pace, of even making the saddle before dark.

Part of the trouble was the dark *daylight*; the clouds that had gathered a week ago had not dissipated, but had thickened daily. Rain had come at last, and it rained for a day and a night — not enough to clear the slime from the Creek, but enough to offer hope of ending the drought. The footing underneath was surprisingly — to him — firm, which was a blessing. No one likes to break a leg when there are no hospitals.

He came to an old nurse log covered with young huckleberry bushes. *Not a good year for these, dammit — like everything else.* He peered through to the other side. Practically a clearing — several trees had come down at once, likely. Waiting and listening a bit first, he

stepped over the brushy log and onto the next one, taking care not to dislodge the peeling fir bark. Nope; too much exposure. Hunkering down on the downhill side of the log, he shuffled, crouching, round to the tall root wad on the end, and stepped round it.

...

Lacey shored himself up on a tangle of old roots full of stones and dirt. How long he'd been out, he had no idea. His entire left side, arm too, tingled as if it had been without circulation overnight. What had happened, and why did his head hurt so much?

He lifted his right hand and probed at his face gingerly. This could not be good. By the feel of it, something had gone through from his left cheekbone to near his right ear, or vice versa. Never one to face away from his enemies, he felt justified in presuming the former. Dried blood, still viscous in the humid air, covered the side of his head, his neck, and his shoulder. He searched his memories, which seemed remarkably unsorted.

There was a war – no, that one was with the Nevadans, who seemed intent on migrating, with prejudice, through his people to go North. No, it was the same war; he'd been detailed, with his tribe, to seek out machine weapons to gain parity. A hopeless business, surely. That man – Magee? – struck him as an overreacher.

It must be midday; hard to tell by the sky from here, with such an overcast. Had he simply overslept? No, a wound, a fighting wound and a serious one. He closed his left eye, and then opened it, closing the right. *Well, things are working.* What this creeping sensation might be though, he had no idea. Craning his neck as much as he dared, he eyed his shoulder. Ants. Ants were having a meal at the expense of his open flesh. Flies, too, were buzzing at him, in spite of the cool, damp air.

He tried again at memory, his head throbbing. There was a fight on a mountain top. Oh, *this* mountain. It must be the same place; here were hemlock trees, their whiplike tops gently tasseling in a slight breeze.

There was a lookout; he and his men had been investing it in the usual way when battle had been joined with a canny warrior.

That one had been an extraordinary difficulty. He had two firearms, and apparently an endless supply of the flaming ammunition, like a Nevadan. Lacey's men had fallen to his left and his right. He had pursued the fighter into the forest. The man had thrown the apparently empty rifle far down the slope and drawn his other weapon. When Lacey's arrow entered him, as he came to the open ground, the warrior had turned and fired one more time.

And here was Lacey's erstwhile foe, sitting beside him, dead, and

fly-blown like himself. So old! One of the oldest – but it was a woman! Yes, Lacey's own arrow protruded from her chest. Wrinkled and rather wasted, with the swelling belly of the starving. White hair, close-cropped. Dressed in mostly leather, like his own warriors. Who would have thought there had been so much fight in such a creature? She had moved like a soldier. In a night fight one cannot tell, but he felt sure she'd taken out most of his war party single-handed. Six men? Eight? With himself likely to make one more.

Though he had no memory of it, he must have finished the business with his knife, for it lay near him, bloody. And he had her revolver. Hands shaking with fatigue, he hefted it and examined, with his better eye, the mechanism. He'd seen, and even handled, this sort of thing in his childhood, before the taboo had been enforced. He was not sure how to check the chambers – there appeared to be no loading gate? No way to see how many shots remained. Nevertheless, Mullins would want it. Firearms were exceedingly precious to Mullins' people.

Feet scraped at the log, to Lacey's left and rear. Footsteps! Cautious, tentative. Either he was being stalked, or someone, experienced, was patrolling in this direction. Lacey slid quietly to his right and leaned on his cold companion. He held up the revolver, but did not move the big hammer, remembering that these made considerable noise.

Another old-woman warrior stood up nearby, with a long rifle in her hands! She pressed aside the huckleberries to better see the ground ahead, and her eyes widened as she took in the two bodies by the root wad. She put the rifle to her shoulder and in one smooth swift movement reached for the lock. She appeared to be shouting something – a warning to the approaching footsteps, perhaps.

Nothing for it, then. *Spirit forgive me for the use of this thing.*

Lacey thumbed back the hammer on the long, heavy revolver, aimed, and fired. The gun twisted and seated itself deeper in his hand. Her rifle also roared, but it was pointing at the sky. Perhaps his round had found its mark.

A large man came round the end of the log, holding in his hand an iron-tipped spear. He was the negotiator from the river bridge. He swiped at the revolver with his spear, but just missed, and the spear point went into Lacey's leg. Lacey thumbed back the hammer again, and dropped it, the weapon's muzzle pointed at the man's chest. There was a resounding 'click,' but no thunder came forth. Both men blinked. Then the man shoved harder on the spear, and Lacey could feel the hot point drive through him into the ground. Though he was already in pain, Lacey felt his consciousness slide toward a numbing indistinctness. The revolver left his hand.

Other soldiers were arriving. The leader gave orders; they scattered to form a defensive perimeter. A disciplined people. Two, Lacey could see, were quickly making litters from rain capes and spears.

"Looks like y'are fadin' a bit. Can ya hear me?" asked the spearman.

Lacey twitched the fingers of his right hand in acknowledgment.

"I'd dearly love to cut you up real slow, for it appears you have killed two of the best among us here, each worth every one of you and more. But I have been tasked to find me a prisoner, and you are elected. If I have not hit an artery you'll do. I would not risk poking at you so much, but I can't have you ambulatory." With that, he drew his own revolver, cocking it in the same smooth motion, and fired into the calf muscle of Lacey's other leg.

The last of Lacey's tenuous hold on daylight slid away.

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"So, Karen, are you going to wake up, or are we going to have to stick you against the wall and prop up your eyelids?"

It was her boss's voice. Was she sleeping on the job? "Nnnnh."

"That's the way you've been greeting me for a week. We *think* we're getting enough broth into you to keep your skinny shrinking corpse alive, but it would help if you'd give us some feedback."

Karen tried to sit up, and failed. She opened her eyes. This was her room, near the Armory.

"That's *some* better. You want to meet Junior or go back to sleep?"

The baby! How is – he – still alive, if it's been a week? "Mmh!"

"We'll take that as a yes. Mrs. Josep, bring over th' incubator?"

Casters squealing, a contraption, pushed by Marleena, rolled toward the bedside. The thing consisted of an old imitation-walnut TV table with an aquarium tank set atop it, lined with a fleece. A bundle of scrounged felt lay within, with two shaking hands, impossibly small, waving from it toward the ceiling. Marleena lifted out the bundle and deposited it by Karen's left side. Karen tried to roll to the left, to better see and to reach with her arm for the hands, but her arm felt like lead.

"What's the matter with me?"

"Exhaustion, mostly," Marleena peeled back the felt, showing Karen a small red face, eyes squeezed shut, with a button nose still covered with white flecks. He looked as if he were hoping to make the bright world vanish by holding his breath. "You basically labored yourself into a coma. Bled a lot, too."

"Can happen nowadays with new moms that have such narrow hips as you do," explained Mary. "Here, lemme roll out of Mrs. J's way so ya c'n meet th' kid. We all wanta know, does he have a name?"

Marleena's strong hands tipped Karen onto her side and propped a pillow behind her. So sore! Karen reached for the little fingers. Could they be any smaller and still be fingers?

"Mind if I ... call him Allyn?"

"Hey, it's none of *my* business whatcha call him." Mary chuckled.

"How has he gotten anything to eat?"

"What we wouldn't give for some working I.V.! Marleena here knows some amazing tricks – got milk from you, believe it or not, and giving it to him from an eyedropper. Won't give me th' details, and I'm not sure I wanta know. Kinda works, though."

"Kinda?"

"He skimps on th' bowel movements. Not gainin' a lot of weight."

"He's not half as big as Arda was."

"Good thing, with *your* pelvis. Not to take anything away from th' kid but he's a preemie. We actually weren't holding out hope this far."

"How does he stay warm in there?" Karen gestured with her eyes toward the fish tank.

"There's an old heating pad underneath. Power cord's coiled up on th' other side from ya. Mr. Selk's idea, actually. He seems to know where every wire in Ridge is located."

"Does ... Allyn ... open his eyes any?"

"Some. And he knows you better than you know him. When we peel him to air out, we plonk him right here." Mary had rolled forward again. She leaned forward – not an easy movement for her – and tapped Karen's breastbone.

The fingers of Allyn's hand twitched in Karen's palm. She felt a corresponding urge – to spend of herself – toward him. If he would only open his eyes! She and the child should be looking into each other – making a golden thread.

Mary looked at Karen quizzically. "I'd thought you'd be more excited. Want we should take him back?"

"No. I'm sorry if I don't look happy, because I think I am. I'm worrying for him, is all."

"You should. He has come to a risky place."

A child cried, but it was not Allyn. Marleena stepped across the room and in one smooth movement lifted Arda from a fleece-lined wooden box, sat down, opened her tunic, and began feeding the girl.

Tiny Allyn sneezed. Mary chuckled again.

The impossibly small eyelids, with their astonishing lashes, fluttered. They pulled back, showing a hint of large pupils: wells of mystery. Karen tried to meet them, offering a tentative half-smile.

"Hello, you."

Allyn's head was too heavy for his diminutive neck, but he somehow rearranged his posture, exactly as if he were trying to get a look at her. Karen watched the rapid and shallow breaths dilating his translucent nostrils.

"So, can I give him a try?"

"Ya feelin' good enough?"

"Mnh. Think so." Karen scrunged around on the thin mattress until she was able to brush the infant's lips with what, to him, must be an

impossibly large nipple. Perhaps there was a residual odor; the tiny body spasmed, both arms throwing themselves wide and fingers curling. He mouthed at her, but could not latch on. Karen felt a rush, and she began leaking from both sides. A drop ran down Baby Allyn's cheek.

"Can't see from over here. How ya's doin'?" asked Dr. Mary.

"Like a waterfall. All I'm going to do is drown him."

Marleena detached herself from Arda, who began complaining immediately, and set her down to hurry over. She swaddled the boy and moved him to the incubator. "Do not be alarmed," said Marleena to Karen's widening eyes. We'll get you expressed and see if we can't get some into him. Then, if you like, perhaps some practice sitting up."

In the background Arda wailed, to no avail.

Karen looked around, but the room offered, as usual, no sign of time, date, or season. How like the room in which she had grown up!

"How long was I out?"

Mary wrinkled her broad nose. "Well, only Dr. Tom was still tracking dates, and his mind is wandering, but I'd guess it's about mid-October."

"Oh!" said Karen, trying to sit up again. "The bandits! We're all still here; did they go away?"

"No, they haven't. And who says we're all still here?" Mary looked at her steadily.

Karen bit her lip, then subsided. "Tell me everything."

...

Selk and Deela, presided over by Guchi, who was carrying a rifle, wrestled with the big dish.

"We should have brought more people," panted Selk, who had removed his glasses. In spite of the overcast and light rain, sweat was finding its way into his eyes.

"They have enough to do. And besides, there are snipers. No point offering a target-rich construction job."

Standing on either side of the Dish, they angled it to the south and well above the horizon, locking it into place with heaps of fire-blackened stones. Deela looked over Selk's mad project with a mixture of awe and disdain.

Much of the hardware had long ago been taken away; no stand seemed to be available and no motor was necessary. The Dish was nestled against the mountain itself, facing south. An orange power cord had been hard-wired into the booster. Both it and the coaxial cable ran round the mountain to the Main Door; these they would, hopefully, bury before too long. A hole had been punched through the

mesh and an old spotting scope, which Selk had found in a trunk – he could not have hoped to keep it if Wilson or Avery were aware of its existence – had been inserted in the hole. The dish could be aimed by adding and subtracting stones; the scope could be aimed by adding and subtracting turns of woven twist-ties. Not elegant engineering; but what was anymore? Other than Karen's primers.

Guchi had moved down the mountain a bit and was scanning the valley and the tree line to their right. All available eyes were needed for the examination of the surrounding hills and valleys anyway; and danger, if it came to them here at all, would come from the forested west slope of Ridge. Guchi knew there were Creekers in those woods. But an infiltrator might very well choose to snipe from there at Selk and Deela, who were oblivious to the surroundings. Guchi felt his unwarlike friends were his responsibility.

Deela whistled and Guchi returned slowly, crabwise, still watching the tree line. "Are we done?" he asked over his shoulder.

"For now, except for burying wires," said Selk. "We have to come back on the first *clear* night and begin aiming the Dish. That could take a week, easily, with this setup."

"I have a lunch. We could go up to the boulders by the command center and eat in the fresh air for once, then bury from there to here. That will last us until tomorrow."

"Lunch?" asked Deela.

"Lunch?" asked Selk. "What the eff counts as *lunch* in this post-food era?"

"You'll see," replied Guchi, with a mysterious smile.

"Huh," said both of the young engineers. But they did as Guchi suggested and left for the crest of Ridge, picking up their tools as they went. Guchi, rifle at ready, followed, devoting as much time to standing watch as bending and climbing.

"I suppose it's too much to hope, clear skies tonight," said Selk, putting on his glasses. They steamed up immediately, and he took them off, wiped them on a stray bit of tunic sleeve, and put them on again.

Deela watched, mildly amused. "You need to spend more time outdoors."

"I do. But I'm usually either following wiring or laying out wiring. *You've* been mostly indoors for the last half year."

"It's true. But I'm told my people were pastoralists. Perhaps something rubbed off on me."

"Pastor-lits?"

"Raised sheep, goats. As you know, I grew up at Beeman's, where my mom and dad did sheep. They told me I am partly from Africa; my grandfather came from there and was a student at Oregon State. He was from a tribe that did goats and sheep."

"Whatever. I don't even know where I'm from. I've been at Savage Mary's for as long as I can remember."

Guchi strode near and dropped his rucksack by them. "Dig in; I'll watch a little more; then Deela can relieve me."

"Not me, huh?" asked Selk.

"Selk, you're a wonder at some things but you can't really see those trees over there, can you?"

"Over where?"

His friends laughed. Guchi climbed a boulder and began scanning in all directions.

Deela reached into the sack and withdrew, one by one, what appeared to be three balls of paper, tied with string. He handed one to Selk, then tore part of the wrapping from his. The scent of the contents astonished him.

"Guchi, *bread*? This is *wheat*?"

"Wheat. A little for us, today; most of what Juanita and the crew is baking is, for now, for the hungriest people, such as the wounded, the old, and a couple of nursing mothers. Oh, and everyone over at Ball Butte."

The technicians fell to, and made short work of the fabulous treat. Selk did not think to ask what it meant that such seed had been served as food, though Guchi knew very well, and Deela, observing Guchi's expression, soon realized it.

Shots echoed from around the hills. Guchi and his friends sprinted for the top of the command center, and listened.

Guchi pointed out the obvious. "Another contest for the top of Ball Butte. That makes six fights in two weeks. We win, then they do, then we do, then they do. And each time we are fewer."

"So are they," replied Deela, taking the rifle from Guchi and handing the cook/soldier his meal. "And we are a little better prepared, I think, to care for our wounded."

...

Avery Murchison sat back in the wheelchair and twisted his torso.

The prisoner, cabled to a bed, smiled, grimly. The smile was lopsided. With no way to truly reconstruct the man's face, Dr. Tom, Elsa, and Mrs. Perkins had concentrated on preventing infection. "Old wounds never really die," he said.

"It's true. And all the people think of me as having a cushy sit-down job."

"Why are you here today?"

"I suppose I want to get to know the man that killed my mother."

"If it were me, I would seek revenge."

"The thought does cross my mind. You don't talk much, but I think you miss your gang. Keeping you cooped up here might just be enough revenge for me for now."

"I love freedom; as who does not. But I do not fear death."

"Everyone does. What you mean is that you can discipline yourself. I come here every day in hopes of finding out what we can all do to get from where we are now, an ugly little stalemate in a small corner of the world, to something better. It might be a treaty. Or just an understanding."

"Or information that I accidentally give you that will get all of my men killed."

"That too. If hostilities remain open, I'll use everything I can hear. So will you, if you can get away. What else is new?"

The prisoner remained silent.

"There are two groups of you. Your guys are better fighters than that other crowd, and you have, or use, less technology. I'm guessing there's a treaty. Between you, or maybe a higher mucky-muck that sent you, and a guy named Magee. Am I right?"

The prisoner turned and looked at the wall.

"And *you're* taking the brunt of the casualties while *they* camp out and offer advice. Tell me, do you really think Magee will keep up his end of the deal?"

Twisting his still-powerful frame, the man looked at Avery from the corner of his eye. "Why did you shave my head?"

"Sorry; know we should have asked your permission, but you were out cold and we have had an awful time with lice here."

The man regarded him steadily.

Avery held his gaze.

At length, the man sat up and grasped the edge of the cot frame with both hands. The sight of those hands reminded Avery of why he had not approached closer to the bed.

The big man spoke. "Though it is not a thing we have among ourselves, so that it sounds strange to me to hear myself say these words: your mother was a great warrior. I am sorry not to have known her."

"Thank you; if you like, you can get to know me."

A glint came into the stranger's eye.

Avery had seen that look before. "No, I'm not going to arm wrestle you to prove a point, but, yeah, I did learn some things from my mom and dad." He gestured toward the throwing knives sheathed at the arms of his chair.

"And your legs?"

"A mine. Friendly fire, actually. Fortunes of war."

"I begin to like you a little. Let me think tonight."

The wrench slipped and Mullins opened two knuckles on the engine cover. "*Eff* it! *Eff* th' whole 'effin' business!" Standing up on the steeply angled tracks of the disabled D-8, he threw the wrench against the bow of the equally hapless LAV, nearby. He gave vent to a torrent of curses.

Jahn, hearing the meltdown, went in search of Lockerby. Lockerby had been on the mountain all night, and for his efforts had lost two of his own men and one of Lacey's in exchange for a possible, but unconfirmed, two locals. He received the news with a tired nod.

"Thank you. Jahn."

"Lockerby." Jahn offered half a salute, then sat down, staring off into the trees.

Lockerby reattached the barrel to the receiver of the Mossberg, which he'd been cleaning, bagged it, slung it over his shoulder, and made his way through the rain to the machines. He found Mullins lying across the Cat seat with his feet on the ceiling of the armored cage and his head down, sourly watching Lockerby's approach from upside down. Oily water ran from the tip of his nose.

"Mullo. Hard times?" asked Lockerby.

"Lockie. Air compressor hose is gone on th' ACERT. Not enough parts, not enough ways to make parts. About out of hydraulic, about out of lube, low on diesel, an' th' tools keep bitin' me." Mullins sucked first one skinned knuckle, then the other.

"Yeah, well, I'll see that, and raise you an arrow through the armpit, almost." Lockerby raised his arm and pointed to a hole in his tattered sleeve.

"Huh. Think they're low on twenty-two?"

"They might be. We're seeing more arrows and crossbow bolts. They've even been known to throw *spears*. Along with their enthusiasm for hand-to-hand." He tapped the pommel of a captured sword at his waist.

"No sign of Lacey or his remains, I suppose."

"Without a trace.' And his crew gets a little more dour every day."

"Yeah, their idea of downtime is to sneak over and watch me with my butt sticking out of this Cat. Seein' how it was supposed to be part of th' deal, I can unnerstan' their concern."

"Your butt or the Cat?"

"What?"

"Part of the deal."

"What?"

"Never mind." Lockerby winced inwardly; he needed to be more careful with his commander; the man could not always take – or 'get,' which could be worse – a ribbing when things were not going well.

Mullins pulled himself up suddenly and swung his legs out onto the treads of the Cat. "What th'ells that?"

"What's what?"

Mullins cocked his head, straining at the distance in the fading light.

Jahn and two of the leading Prinevilles came running to the Cat.

"Mullins, suh."

"Jahn."

"They's 'nother convoy comin'."

"Yeah. Jahn, you still got that little rifle?"

"Suh, yes, suh."

"Lockie, take th' shotgun an' half th' men here an' line out from th' LAV on th' right. Jahn, same thing on th' left. I'll run th' turret. There's no road but this'n, so we'll hit em' as they come round th' bend. Should be a turkey shoot." He looked at the Prinevilles. "They will kill us all if they get a chance; are ya game?"

"We will fight. But half of us are on the mountain."

"How 'bout one of ya's go up an' get 'em, th' other half round up yer camp an' put 'em on th' line. We'll need everybody for this."

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A long, skinny hand, wobbling slightly as the vehicle jounced along, pointed to a dial. "We used to do this with a computer and a joystick, soldier. But what we have here used ta be called analog gear. Now you see these numbers we have painted on this dial, an' you see this arrow on th' board here pointin' at th' zee-ro on th' dial."

"Yes, sir."

"This here truck's one 'a my best kept secrets, or I would have trained you before now. I have set this little gizmo humming, but with no power to th' mains yet. So I'm goin' up front with Milady, an' when I shout 'three,' crank it round to this'n, which by th' way is a three. Hold it there till I say 'zee-ro.' Do *not* go past the three; I need re-habs, not corpses. An' keep that hat on, or you'll likely not hear me say anythin' at all an' wake up later with a godawful headache. Good?"

"Understood, sir."

Magee slid into the passenger seat of the converted MRAP. He picked up and fastened on a bulky helmet. "Hello, my dear."

The Doctor, already helmeted, kept both hands on the wheel, watching for impediments in the unimproved "road." "Hello, my lord. We have twice passed the bridge shown on the map, and no sign of your fugitives. It does make me nervous to have a window in front of me with a rogue LAV out there in the twilight."

"Well, we got a decoy. Mullins is not likely to wait to shoot th' second vehicle in line. Besides," he smiled, "We don't know th' LAV's

even operational at this point."

"It must have been so at some time, my lord, for the shell-holes on the long mountain behind us are fresh."

"I'd guess this fork in th' road means they are asslin' around out here. Tryin' th' right, then th' left. With no more supplies than they're down to by now, th' locals will have fought 'em to a standstill."

"Your Mullins is perhaps overextended, my lord."

Magee turned his thick glasses upon her. "*My Mullins, huh.*"

"I am sorry my lord, I had of course not meant to cast aspersions." She smiled.

"He an' Lockie were all I had left that were any way qualified for field command. Wolf's improvisational skills have complicated things, as usual."

The Doctor smiled again, grimly. "On that, I will be so good as not to repeat myself, my lord."

The vehicles turned a corner as the ground sloped slightly upward. A flash of light lit up the evening and the lead truck, driven by a prisoner and containing no supplies or other personnel, burst into flames.

"Looky there, right on schedule. Halt th' column, my dear." Magee leaned back and shouted over his shoulder. "*Three!*" He reached up to the ceiling and began cranking a small wheel. "Might as well give it a three-sixty."

"That will take out our own men, my lord."

Magee continued cranking. "Yep, for at least half an hour, even in th' trucks. But anyone within two clicks will be just as out of it, meanin' no surprises from in front, behind, right, or left, an' no one will bother us while you an' I're zip-tyin' our misbehavin' children up there."

"I do not think the beam will penetrate the LAV-35 well."

"It's a risk. But we are likely so heavily outnumbered that we have had to barge right in. My money, whichever of our bad boys fired that thing, 'specially if it's Mullins, will get curious and stick his head out for a look-see. Then he'll sleep like a baby."

"That will be a relief, my lord."

"Yeah, that gun's wicked. But so are you, my dear. Thanks ever so for savin' up th' microwave kit."

"My pleasure, my lord."

...

Emilio followed Josep into the lookout on Ball Butte. He took in, at a glance, the emptiness of the place, and the ineradicable rancid smell of warmaking. Brass casings, plastic, broken glass, and scraps of leather, some of them scorched and bloodstained, lay about. Over the last two weeks, the place had been fired into and firebombed, and men

and women had bled here. Wastes had overflowed the latrine and had perforce been dumped out the doorway and windows. The natural-stone building – a cave, really – had become a monument to humanity at its worst. "It is as you say, Mr. Josep. The position has been abandoned."

Light, resembling lightning in its intensity, arced across the ceiling, flared and faded. Both men ducked. Echoes of explosion reverberated round the hills.

Josep went to the window, as Emilio reflexively covered the door. "Was that even directed at us?" asked the older man.

Josep studied a pillar of smoke, lit in shades of pink from underneath, rising and drifting away to the west. "I think not. Perhaps there is fighting among our f ..." He dropped his bow and covered his ears with his hands.

Emilio, in agony, fell to his knees. His rifle dropped from his numbed hands and he leaned against the doorway, nauseated. Focusing on the distance in an effort to maintain control, he could see that several members of their crew were in the same condition as themselves. Then, as quickly as the buzzing, debilitating sensation in his flesh had come, it vanished, leaving behind a massive headache.

A hand gripped his shoulder, and Emilio turned, painfully. Josep knelt beside him, one hand resting on his shoulder, the palm of the other resting on his own forehead.

"What in all Jeeah's green earth was that?" asked Emilio, forgetting his resolve to avoid religious language in the presence of his Christian friend.

"I do not know," replied the Roundhouser. "I have never felt anything like it. And my head is splitting."

"Mine as well. We must establish a defensive posture." Emilio rose on rubbery legs, taking up the tiny rifle as he did so, and stepped outside. His hand shaking, he reached for his whistle, and shrilled to every Creeker and Roundhouser in the vicinity.

As they came up, some supporting one another weakly, he made signs to them not to congregate in the open, but to take up positions, weapons at the ready, among the nearby boulders. He sensed that Josep had returned to the window. "Mr. Josep, do you see anything that will explain what has occurred?"

"No – or yes and no. There are new trucks, I think. They are in the place where we spoke with the Bledsoes, or near. Whatever is burning is in the trees, but I feel sure it is a vehicle. And there is one illuminated by the flames, which has a thing on its roof."

"A turret?"

"Not the cannon thing, no. It looks like that apparatus we carried to Ridge for your young engineer with the glasses."

"Bowl-shaped?"

"Yes. And it is pointed to the north."

"Ah, Mr. Josep, if we live through the night, perhaps we will ask Mary or Mr. Selk what you have seen. No doubt it is as you say, a gentlemen's disagreement is in progress below. It cannot bode well, I think."

Emilio turned to the men and women of his crew.

"Is everyone alive, uninjured and accounted for?"

Mrs. Perkins, a team leader, responded. "We are, but everyone hurts like the dickens."

Emilio could see that some were still holding their heads. "*I think*, from overhearing conversation among our science crew in the refectory, that it is a weapon, and that its power diminishes over distance. There may be an altercation in the valley to our west, in which case we are, as Mr. Avery would say, 'collateral damage.' I am feeling some relief now; is it so for us all?"

Mrs. Perkins replied again. "It would seem so, sir."

"It is well. Make four teams of four, as we have discussed. Rifle, shotgun, two bows. Be sure there is at least one firebomb in each team and means to make it burn. Dispose yourselves north, west, and south of the summit, and one team in the fort. Everyone within hearing of each team's whistle and designate a watcher for the fore night and another for every three hands of the night. I will join the north team and Mr. Josep will run down to relieve command at Bridge. If you find means, make walls or holes for cover. Otherwise seek out suitable tree trunks. Make yourselves comfortable as you may, as it will be a wet night."

Despite their training and their best intentions, the next few minutes were noisy. Emilio winced. *We are a graceful enough people in peace. In war, less so. May we learn better before our enemies do.*

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Jorj almost smiled, but the cylinder sleeve did not quite fit. Considering it was handmade, he could not complain. Mr. Deela was a pleasure to work with; the part was very close to being the real deal. Deerie's other problems he could deal with soon enough; mostly a matter of hoses. He pulled things apart again and reached for the round file. As he did so, David, Nine-ah, and Raoul huffed into the newly illuminated interior of the New Ames barn, pulling a heavily laden hand cart.

"Where to?" asked Raul, shaking his head to rid his cedar rain hat of excess moisture.

"What have you fine young people got here?"

"Plate steel, sir," said Nine-ah, the young Roundhouser who had joined her life with Raul's.

"Oh, right, right. Are the corners drilled out and all?"

Raul, putting his arm round Nine-ah's shoulder, replied. "Yes, a hole about every thirty centimeters. And the plates are all cut to the sizes you requested, sir."

"Well, an old man can't ask for more than that. Lean 'em up to the right-hand side here; don't pinch your fingers though. Uhh ... any idea where Mr. Bolo is?"

"He was in the line over by Bridge, last two days running, and is resting at Chaney's, sir."

"Well, I won't bother him right now. But he's awful handy for holding heavy iron in place." Jorj looked at first one and then the other of the boys, imploringly.

The young men, who had been raised in a family in which requests were made more directly, did not catch on immediately. But after an uncomfortable silence, Nine-ah looked at Raoul and raised an eyebrow, then gestured with her head. Raoul made an "O" with his mouth, then turned to Jorj. "Sir, we're not really on duty right now; could we be of service?"

Jorj beamed upon them. "Why, perhaps you can, and it's kind of you to ask." He reached for a socket wrench, a ratchet wrench, and a coffee can from his toolbox. "This is a five-eighths socket, see, and these in the can are five-eighths bolts, nuts, and washers, two-and-a-half inch, which the children have scoured up for me from all the farms round. Some are nine-sixteenths, but they'll do, and here's another socket for those. Umm, you all look a little blank. Seen these before?"

Raoul took the wrenches. "Yes, sir, a little. What are we making?"

Jorge waved his hand grandly at Deerie, the wood-fired three-roller crawler tractor. "We are building a tank. Smallest d- ... smallest tank in the history of the world, kids, but a tank all the same."

∴

Vernie reached for the long-barrelled Kentucky rifle. It was surprisingly heavy for such a slim thing. "How does it work?"

Tomma held up Maggie's powder horn. "Well, it's not that different from th' Hawken. Measure powder into th' barrel, put your patch in, ram with the ramrod that's tucked under the barrel here, add th' ball, ram again, pour a smidgen of powder into the pan, pull th' hammer back, aim and fire. The flint will throw a spark, and with any luck th' spark will touch off the powder, which will burn down the touch-hole and set off th' powder in th' breach."

"Sounds iffy."

"T'is. Th' cap was a great invention."

"I'd almost rather get one of the twenty-twos."

"We're maxed out on those. And everyone's down to about twenty rounds each with them, anyway. You have enough makings here for about thirty-five shots – *if* you can keep this thing out of the rain."

"These little dugouts are damp, but they'll do. How is Maggie?"

"She's never regained consciousness, and may not beat the infection. Another loss we couldn't afford. And something's th' matter with Dr. Tom. It's like you can't get him interested anymore; Elsa is having to do practically everything, with a little help from Nita and old Mrs. Lazar."

"We're not doing so hot."

"No; we're not, but th' consolation is, neither are *they*." Tomma gestured with his head through the mist toward Bridge. "Wilson thinks they've brought everybody they've got. If we can outlast them, there might not be any war for a long time; give us a chance to pull a food scene together."

"Sweetie, that's whistling in the dark. You know we've been eating *wheat*, don't you? Whoa!" This last came in a whisper.

"What?"

"Somebody coming." Vernie, not quite ready to practice loading the rifle, reached for his crossbow.

Tomma aimed his Hawken at the night. "Word?" he called out softly.

From the nearby hemlocks came a Roundhouse accent: "Whites. Word?"

"Eyes."

The visitor turned out to be Josep. He smiled indulgently.

"Bundling, are we?"

"Well, Tomma has to show me how to use this thing." Vernie set down the crossbow and hefted the flintlock.

"And it's warmer w'two, anyway," added Tomma.

"Agreed and agreed; but once Mr. Vernie has the drill down, if you could return to your own pit, Mr. Tomma, we'll have better coverage."

"Understood, sir." Tomma grinned.

Josep moved on, checking the remaining rifle pits.

"Huh," said Vernie, chagrined.

"Not to worry; he's good at this. And kindly in his way."

"Yes. Well." Vernie's hand sought out Tomma's in the gathering darkness. "Just sit with me a little longer."

Tomma shifted closer. "We've been lucky, you and I."

"Yes. We've been lucky. You and me."

∴

Mullins had not exactly lost consciousness, but whatever it was, was same as. He could not, by sending anything resembling commands,

detect movement in his arms or legs, nor could he turn his head. For the time being, had he recovered the power of speech, he would not have been able to give anyone his name or recent history. As his mind swam up from a gray lake of pain, he found himself sorting through memories from longer ago than he generally cared to visit: his mother, brushing his hair from his eyes and offering him roasted meat. He'd taken it, glad of it in his immense hunger, and had wondered at her turning from him, weeping, as he ate. Or the day she'd been taken away by laughing men as he hid where she'd placed him, not daring to whimper at her not returning.

Now he remembered joining a band of youths, making his place among them by leaving the one that had taunted him bleeding and wrecked against a railyard fence. And working his way up through their ranks to become their leader, through his instinct for mechanics. He had led the gang in fairly sophisticated exercises in breaking and entering, specializing in large, faceless warehouses.

But one of these buildings, it had turned out, was occupied by men in mottled green-and-brown clothing who had raised weapons in the corridor and barked commands. When he'd turned to run, he could see his crew falling down in heaps by the door, and he himself, deafened and going blind, had fallen behind them. And when he'd forced himself to consciousness, he'd been a prisoner of the barking men in their dark glasses. This deadness in his arms and legs – it was like that then, too.

It was in prison, which was to become his home for much of his life, that he'd met his final teachers, Magee and the always-lucky loner, Wolf. Magee had found him fellow convicts with whom to work on machinery, and Wolf had helped him refine his defensive techniques.

And then the prison guards, the soldiers with their sunglasses, had hastily loaded themselves onto flying machines and simply departed – where, and why, they certainly did not convey to the prison population, who'd been simply left in lockdown.

It was the suddenness of the departure that had been Mullins', and everyone else's, great opportunity, for Mullins, seeking new tools, had taken advantage of the first breakdown in the soldiers' discipline to hide himself away in a bin, while Lockerby sat in their cell, talking to a pile of blankets in Mullins' bed as if he were there. And so it was he, Mullins, that had given second life to Magee's ambitions, by releasing everyone.

Mullins tried lifting his head. Ohhh, painful. Face down? Had he been shot?

"A little life returns to a little life, I see."

Magee? Had Mullins muffed the jailbreak? Perhaps not all the Army guards had left, with their vicious sleep-inducing sidearms?

"A splash of water for th' lad, please. Not too much; it's been in short supply here, I find. Young man, set up some rain catchment, will ya? Tarps are in th' third truck back; just ask for 'em."

"Suh, yes, suh." Jahn's voice.

Something – warm, cold? – oh, wetness – blanketed the side of Mullins' head and snaked down his throat. He must be lying on his side, or face down. He blinked. Firelight?

"Much better. For some reason, my boy, you've outslept your little army. Very sloppy of you."

Mullins tried commanding his arms again, reflexively, and found that his hands were tied behind his back. "S ... sss ... "

In the night above, Magee's voice poured down in a soothing purr. "Touching; I believe you are trying to say 'sir.' We'll dispense with that formality for now, as you are my prisoner and I must decide your disposition. As usual, our dear Doctor, who is so very fond of mayhem, insists you must receive the red hypo, and while I agree that is your merit, I'm always open to discussion of salvage operations."

"Vuh ... vuh ... "

"Very kind of me, I know. Quite a thick tongue you have there; let's try yes-and-no questions. Did Wolf escape your custody?"

"Yuh ... ssuh."

"Exceedingly sloppy. Did you ascertain which direction he went?"

"Nuh."

"North? Well, that might mean something. Is he armed?"

"Dud ... dnn ... "

"You don't know. And I presume he has made himself scarce."

Mullins managed a nod.

"Am I right in presuming that you have persisted in your assignment here in an effort to use the power plant as a means toward achieving some kind of ascendancy over me?"

"Meh ... nuh ... no, sir."

"Ah, a most dangerous question produces some coherency. Tell me, if you are ready, what were you *thinking*?"

"Sir, if we ... if we were able to complete the mission, we hoped to improve our position – regain some favor."

"Seek clemency. And you tried a direct assault on th' right, which was repelled, then prepared to repeat th' effort on the left?"

"Yes, sir ... our allies had taken the lookout, and we aimed to haul the gun to the summit and rake the valley from there."

"A not-too-awful plan, stymied however by your disobedience in letting Wolf get away, for your supply of parts dried up forthwith."

"Sir."

"Next, an important question. Is the Cat's situation subject to field service?"

"Sir, it's mostly a matter 'a hoses. Got none."

"Well, we're good, then. How 'bout that LAV?"

"Not so good, sir. We are treating it as towed artillery."

"I have to say, you're not impressing th' tribals much. Well, Mully – against the Doctor's advice, and let us both remember, *she* was right in the matter of Wolf and I was wrong – I believe I will make use of you and not dispose of you. I have brought things to gladden the heart of any good motor mechanic. At first light, you will apply yourself to the regaining for me the use of the Cat."

Mullins could see, through the rain that dripped into his eyes, booted feet walking away from him past the fire. Someone laughed somewhere.

What was it about rain, yellow flames, and boots? Mullins blinked away the rain. Oh, yes. It had rained the night those laughing men had pulled his mother away from the fire.

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"What are they doing now?" asked the young Roundhouse woman standing next to Mrs. Perkins.

"I have no idea," she replied, "and I'm not sure binoculars would help. The trees down there were not in the Fire, and they're in the way. But it can't be good. It looks like the bandits have been reinforced, and I think they're working on the vehicles. There's also a lot of smoke from what looks to me like cooking fires. *Where* do they get so much to eat?"

"You know the answer as well as I."

Mrs. Perkins chewed a fingernail distractedly. "I wish Mr. Molinero would come back up here. He'd be better able to make out whether to send a runner to report."

"No, he would not," replied Emilio, stepping into the shelter. "You say they are still in camp, and so that means no change. You would surely send a report if they showed signs of moving toward Bridge or here, and it may be that is no more than I would do."

"Thank you, Mr. M.; I was just feeling a little twitchy."

"First command always does that to a soldier."

"Well, now that you are here, what brought you out of the woods?"

"Our runner with the initial report has returned and tells us a relief party is right behind him. So I am here to greet them."

Even as Emilio spoke, a whistle blew from the direction of the path from the valley, signaling the arrival of the new crew.

They stepped from the stone shelter into welcome sunshine, but halted in surprise at the sight before them.

A number of fighters entered the clearing, carrying heavy packs or bedrolls, among them Billee with Krall, the dog from Roundhouse, and Ro-eena, who was unrolling wire from a spool as she came on.

But what drew their eyes was Wilson, apparently completely unarmed and carrying a coiled length of rope, walking next to the Creek's last remaining horse. On the horse, easy in his seat and armed with a Creek selfbow and a handsome Bowie knife, sat a large man Mrs. Perkins had not seen before. He had been good-looking once, perhaps; but his face, from mouth to ear, was a swollen mass of stiches, gleaming with salve. He looked as if part of his jawbone might be missing.

"Hey, gang," said Wilson. "Ready to get down from here for some of Mrs. M.'s cookin'?"

Emilio frowned. "What is this, if I may ask?"

"We're conductin' a little experiment in diplomacy."

"I do not think I like what this can mean, sir."

"Well, let's not air it out in public, if we can help it. Mr. Lacey, will you excuse us for a conference, please?"

The big man nodded gravely. Wilson and Emilio walked round the corner of the lookout.

Billee, with Krall in tow, stepped over to Mrs. Perkins. The girl's face was a study in tragedy, but she addressed herself to business in hand. "Let's go inside, you 'n me."

"Certainly, honey."

Inside the now much cleaner and homier little fort, Billee ran her eyes over everything, found it sufficient, threw down her load, and moved to the window. She watched the distant smoke for a moment, bit her lip, nodded to herself, and turned to Mrs. Perkins.

"How's everyone?"

"Tired, cold, wet, and hungry. But it has been quiet up here."

"We'll give ya a feed before ya go down. What's the disposition of crews?"

"Four, with four each. One crew here, three on approaches."

"K, I can replicate that with crews of three. After ya eat, y'should pack up and go home."

"Bee, what in Jeeah's name is Captain Wilson up to?"

"Prisoner exchange."

"What?"

"It's a ruse. Get Mr. Eastsider back to his folks so he can tell 'em to go home. Will's going as surety. If Mr. Big comes into the lines with a new horse and a prisoner, he doesn't lose face, y'see."

"But then we've lost – *you've* lost – oh, no, this just *can't* be."

"Well, I said '*ruse*', didn't I?" Big man's s'posed to let him go when it's all settled."

"Sounds awfully iffy if you ask me."

Billee's face crumpled. "Well, nobody asked *me*." She began sipping air in short, hard breaths.

"Are you hyperventilating? You have every right, honey, but why

don't you just sit down here, hold onto Krall, and take three deep breaths. Captain would not take such a risk if he didn't have good reason to believe in what he's doing."

"Um." Billee's eyes were glistening.

"Sit. And here's a bit of a rag to snuffle in. Come out here as soon as you think you look bossy enough and boss us around some, all right?"

Mrs. Perkins stepped out the door. She found Ro-eena, spool in hands, waiting there round-eyed. "Not yet."

"Oh, no, ma-am, I have a little bit of sense."

"You have a lot, and we both know it. She'll be out in a moment."

Mrs. Perkins turned and almost collided with Wilson. "She's in here," she smiled.

"Thanks." Wilson did not smile in return. He stooped to enter.

Mrs. Perkins walked over to the stranger, who sat alone on the horse. It was clear he was discreetly under guard, as several of Billee's soldiers had not gone far, yet he seemed completely relaxed. She was sure, though, that his broken face could not be comfortable for him.

"Hello," she said.

He met her eyes directly but made no reply. Something in his searching look struck her; had he never seen a Black woman?

"This is a good animal you have here." She patted its neck. The big head swung round, and a huge nose snuffled at her ear.

The man's eyes softened. "Pardon me for not dismounting. I am injured in both legs. I have not seen this breed before. He would be of greater value to my people if he were not a gelding, but he will be of interest."

"He's part Percheron. They make good plow horses; farming and heavy cartage."

"And tall. I was always a little hard on our Appaloosas."

"Are there still Appys? I'm glad. My dad loved them. But, you know, he might not be a good war horse."

"I saw that; but I have those. This will make a good ceremonial animal, I think. Something to make the Bend tribe grind their teeth."

Oh, my goodness, is he trying to smile? Hope he doesn't split his cheek. "Well. Then it should work, shouldn't it?"

"My men are among the best of my people. They will receive your captain well, and honor themselves before Spirit in returning to him his freedom."

"I sincerely hope so, for your sake."

"I understand; the girl with the dog." Again the almost-smile.

Emilio stepped forward. "Yes. That is his wife; she will track you and hand you your head if he does not come back."

Avery knurled the focusing knob. "It seems a very chummy gathering over there."

"May I see?" Karen perched herself on one leatherette arm of his chair.

He handed her the binoculars. "Mind the throwing knife."

"I'm clear of it," she said, but looked down anyway to be sure.

"Should you even be up here?"

"*You* sent for *me*. I'm fine, and Allyn's as good as he can be in his fishbowl." She put the glasses to her eyes, fiddling the knob one-handed. "Bouncy. What are these, ten-ex?" She turned them over dourly. "Uh huh, there's a hole for a tripod mount. Got one?"

"A tripod? Not at the moment. With that one all-doing hand of yours, you might try resting the binocs on the window casement."

"Here, I'll try this." She draped the strap around her elbow and tensioned it against her hand. She stood up, stepped forward, and leaned her elbow against the command console. "Some better."

"Who taught you that?"

"My father, of course."

"Of course. What do you see?"

"Busy bodies. Who's that on the horse?"

"That's the wounded guy we had in the brig."

"I think he's an *Eastsider*!" Karen spat the word.

"Good call from this distance. And without his braids, too. You had a run-in with them once, I gather."

Karen looked at Avery, her eyes hardened to flints. "What are you up to?"

"Nothing you wouldn't try yourself if you're a leader of a people. Feeling ready for the responsibility?" *She's about ready to explode. Am I pushing on this too soon?*

"They're *eaters*; they hunt *people*."

"I think that description may fit most nowadays, at least in this part of the world. He's being returned to his tribesmen to persuade them to leave off aiding Magee. Wilson and I have spent a lot of time on him and we think this risk, which is a heavy one, is worth taking under our circumstances."

"And we just turn him *loose*? With our *last horse*?"

"We're out of hay for this winter anyway. We'd have to eat the poor thing, assuming we're here to do so. You know we've broken into the last of the grains. This gives him something to show his men; bragging rights are important over there."

"Yes. They are." She returned to her viewing. "I had to kill two of them to keep from being bragging rights myself."

"And he's not unaccompanied. Wilson will go with him as a surety

of our good intentions."

She whirled round again. "Why? They go, or they stay. We lose our best man to no advantage."

Avery winced inwardly. Best man. Well, it was probably no more or less than the truth. "They *might* become our allies instead of Magee's. Now. Or down the line."

Karen stood staring at him open-mouthed.

Doctor Mary rolled in from the hall, followed by Mrs. Lazar, Selk, and Elsa Chaney. The latter three found chairs and pulled them up to the table. Selk carried, of all things, a leather-bound attaché case.

"Oh, ho," said Mary. "From Karen's looks, you've been catching her up on our gambit."

Karen whirled on her. "They're *eaters*."

"Shall I tell her?" Mary addressed herself to Avery.

"Be my guest; frankly I'm terrified of her."

"Tell me *what*? We're cannibals too and I'm the last to know?"

"No, dear girl," replied Mary, her head tipped to one side. "We've made an effort here – last outpost of civvy, and all that. *So far* so good. Unsustainable practice. Humans are highly tainted with cesium nowadays, and there's a kind of a mad-cow liability, too."

"What, then?"

Mary looked at Karen for a long moment. "Yer just about to curdle your milk – think of little Allyn. Tell you what, wontcha sit at th' table."

Elsa had brought over an extra chair and placed it beside herself. She patted the seat and smiled tentatively. Karen sensed that Elsa was, if anything, nearly as stressed as she. She would, for Elsa's sake, hear them out. She sat.

Mary rolled round the table to the space they had left for her, and put her hands on the table, fingers interlaced.

"Karen, my dear, you were brought up on canned food?"

"Yes; almost entirely, I think."

"From, say, age four to fourteen. Ten years."

"Yes."

"Vegetables, fruit, meat."

"Yes, ma'am. One can of something for breakfast, two, of two different kinds, for lunch. We had no suppers."

"Hence your slim figure, which you're getting back, I'm glad to see. So that was, for the two of you, six average-sized cans a day – say, about a kilo."

"Yes."

"Often meat."

"It was a beef-heavy diet, yes." Karen knitted up her eyebrows.

"Where is this going?"

"Did you always see the cans?"

"What?"

"Karen, where in a *thoroughly* looted city did your dad find *twenty-one thousand nine hundred* cans? Of, mostly, beef?"

Karen blinked, then sat still, her lips parted. Elsa reached to put her arm around Karen's shoulder, but the young woman shrugged her off. Karen stood up, gulping at the room's suddenly stuffy air. Her chair fell over backward.

Tears started, from Karen's wide eyes. "Unh. *Unh-h-h-h*." She grabbed at her tunic, loose where the large belly had been, and ran from the room.

Mary unlaced her fingers and placed her palms down on the table.

Avery exhaled. "Well, that went well." He reached out and poked at Selk's attaché case morosely.

Elsa reached over and patted his hand. "No, actually, I think it did. She'll think this through and be the stronger for it."

"Yeah, well," said Mary. "We see eye ta eye on this one. Even those who are all about honesty sometimes know when to pull their punches. I think all the more highly of Mr. Rutledge, I really do."

Avery gave Mary a sharp look. "Was that a correct figure?"

Computationally? Yes. But garbage in, garbage out. She ate less than that when she was four, more when she was fourteen. Throw in th' odd possum for them both. But a *reasonable* figure. I don't see any way 'round it."

"Mary, you are so scary sometimes," put in Elsa.

"What, 'scary' is about feelings. Look, there's more. I *really* admire th' man. You think telling her to lock her door all those years was just about bandits?"

Elsa gasped. But she didn't offer a reply.

Avery and Selk exchanged uncomfortable glances. This was getting into territory of which they knew little.

Avery cleared his throat. "Hnh-hmm. So, should we hear from Selk?"

"Sure," said Dr. Mary, companionably.

Elsa and Mrs. Lazar nodded. Everyone turned to the young technician.

Selk swallowed, his prominent Adam's apple bobbing. "Well ... so ... so, anyway, here is Mr. Angle's valise, which we believe the bandit did not see. The shoebox had been gone through, and they may have had a conversation ... but this was inside the attic floor. I don't think Mr. Angle was supposed to have these." He opened the case and hefted out a pile of papers and silvery plastic squares.

Mary picked up one of the squares, flipped it over, and sardonically admired herself in its refractive surface. *Jabba the Hutt Enters the Black Hole*. "These are entirely opaque to us these days. Last outpost, indeed."

"I suspected as much," said Avery. "But the printouts may be useful, yes?"

"I think so," replied Selk. "Though my ... my reading comprehension is not up to a lot of it."

"You're better than you think." Mary said. She turned to Avery. "Did we find out how poor Wilbur died? I forget."

"Oh, we talked about that in one of the last General Meetings. Something like an ice-pick to the brain stem."

"Right. The bandit could have just been covering his tracks, but I have the feeling the monster's literate. So, first of all, for the edification of those here, Selk, what do we know was in the shoebox that wasn't in the leather thingy?"

Selk brightened. "The shoebox is all about Wilbur Angle's line, which was the nuclear battery. A ... a Navy nuke techie. This stuff here, which was found during the investigation, is about the satellite, which, it turns out, is why Ridge is here."

"Then this persistent siege may be only about the power source, not the weapon?"

"Likely."

"But they could figure out what they've got once they get it?"

"Not likely, without these papers and some education. But not impossible." He reached for an ancient calendar page, which he'd laid on top of the pile of papers, unfolded it, and spread it on the table, blank side up, then waved his hand over a pencil nearby. "May I?"

Avery waved off the politeness. "My pencil, your pencil."

"Thank you." Selk drew a circle in the center of the paper. "There is no suitable illustration among the printouts, so I will draw. This is us." Avery smiled. "Earth."

"And these three dots would be the DARPA laser array."

"In space."

"Yes, over thirty thousand kilometers out."

"Why three?"

"Best coverage." Selk drew three triangles, intersecting at points equidistant on the circle. "The entire world could be reached in this way very economically. They could have controlled all three from a laptop anywhere, back when there were other satellites and such, for communication. And only three transmission stations would have been required for backup."

"And are there three of them?"

"Don't know; that *was* planned. There's not much about the other ones here; need-to-know applied."

Elsa raised her hand. "Whatever was it for?"

Mary answered. "World domination. Things had gotten so outta hand, and China'd begun refusing to share its access to Africa and South America. Nuclear was the only other lever left for tryin' to pry

them off the pot, but once you go nuclear, all bets are off."

"Which happened anyway." Avery ran his hand over the stubble on his chin. He missed his beard. *Damned lice!*

"But very fitfully. Accurate news was hard to come by, in the end, fellas, but I have the impression this thing was *used*. We may very well owe it our lives."

Elsa picked up one of the squares and examined her reflection in its surface. *Oh, dear Jeeah, am I that old?*

Mary was still orating. "The world almost died of famine, of flood and fire and disease, of heat, of hate, of war, of grief. The hands of power itched to reach for th' last button, the nuclear option. Some did. But then things began happenin' to the weapons, and the communications. Inexplicable things. Precise weapon strikes of a kind unknown to the world at large. But this came too late to save the powerful – the world's computers were dying of interference: from the sun, from electromagnetic warfare, and from th' general increase in background radiation. The military had computers and communications the longest, but th' chaos caught up with 'em."

"Good," said Elsa emphatically.

"Hence," Mary went on, "the Undoing, which, as we all know was mostly the cooking-off of a number of abandoned nuclear power plants and cooling ponds."

"And so, what do these papers tell us? That we have the remains of the 'precise weapon'?" Avery asked, glancing back at Selk, who was riffling through them reverently.

"Sir, what's left of it, yes. We think. All but the computers and the gee-pee-ess."

Mary rocked herself back and forth by shoving and pulling on her chair wheels. "Young Mr. Selk has convinced me we should have a go at running this thing."

"So you both really do think there's a satellite still out there? After all this time? How?" Avery remembered his dad, Carey Murchison, telling him about the fall of the satellites; their orbits had decayed, one by one, and they had become bright meteors – the brightest of all being the second and last International Space Station, which had struck the atmosphere somewhere near the Marquesas, wherever that was, seared the skies above Mexico and Missouri, and peppered Iceland and Spitzbergen with firebombs.

Selk smiled, almost patronizingly. He tapped the papers. "It's *huge*, well shielded and robust, with multiply-redundant gyros and attitude thrusters, plenty of fuel, and of course has a nuclear battery, just as we do."

"I'm sure you know what all that means ... and how do you know it hasn't fallen?"

"We've been watching it through the spotting scope. Bee and Guchi

have the best eyes." Selk tapped his diagram with the pencil. "As we noted, its orbit is what was called geosynchronous – goes around us every twenty-four hours, above the equator – so, from our point of view it's always in the same place, more or less – south of here, parked at ninety degrees west, it says here. And here's the good part."

Selk stood up and walked to a locker-style cabinet door on the wall, not far from the room's entrance. He threw open the door. Masses of wires, like multicolored spaghetti, appeared, which Avery had seen before, but on a shelf above now stood a squat green steel box, with a round glass window on its face. Selk flipped a toggle switch beneath the screen, and played with knobs to either side of the switch as the screen slowly came to life. All that appeared there was a sinuous green line that snaked across a gray background against a grid of fainter green lines, then back down again. "This is basically an ancient type of oscilloscope. You may have seen it sitting in one of the storerooms down on the fourth level."

"I have. But I've never seen it lit up like this. So, it's not a television or anything like that?"

"No; it's a just diagnostic tool really; Dr. Mary knows things about it that I don't. But the DARPA people had adapted it, according to those papers on the table, to help the control panel talk to the satellite. In case anything went wrong with the computers. We're linked to the dish through the 'scope, and if the dish isn't pointed right, the signal shown here drops in intensity – toward the wye axis, here. This way we can add or remove a few pebbles under the edge of the dish, and get the strongest link."

"You're beyond me. But I take it you believe you've gained control of the satellite?"

"Well, yes and no. We can't move it around or change its position; that's fixed. But we think we can tell it to aim and fire, though it's now completely blind."

"Have you tried it?"

"Well-I-I ... today's the day, sir, if you like."

"By all means. We need everything we can get. What's the anticipated effect?"

Selk looked at Dr. Mary. Mary shifted her weight in her wheelchair and sighed. "We don't really know. Clearly they thought this was worth doin', but it boggles th' mind. Radiant energy falls away by the inverse square of the distance, and th' distance in this case is *immense*. The most effect would be at the equator, directly beneath the thing. But from that orbit's viewpoint, that's not really much closer."

"So, what's a guess? Set fire to buildings, shatter glass?" Avery, guiltily, suddenly remembered something ignoble from his childhood concerning insects and a magnifying glass. "Or just burn ants?"

Elsa tipped her head sideways and looked hard at Avery, but Mary

simply sighed. "We're just going to have to try it and see."

"I would expect an incendiary effect, yes, maybe a cutting or ablative effect, very very narrow beam," said Selk brightly. "Not visible spectrum. Just a guess."

Avery looked at the two of them. Never, even from Mary, had he heard so much jargon. How much had she poured into this myopic creature's head?

Suddenly Mrs. Lazar spoke. "And now men see not the light which is bright in the skies; but the wind passeth, and cleanseth them."

Avery turned to her. "More Leviticus?"

"Job."

"Geniuses and living libraries all around me. So what do we *do* to try out this thing?"

Everyone turned to Selk. His great moment having arrived at last, it proved too much for him, and he began picking at his nose.

Elsa kicked him beneath the table.

"Oh," he said, as his thick glasses slid down on a sudden sheen of perspiration. He pushed them back. "Nothing to it, really. Throw on the toggle switch under that cap left of the dials – 'A', 'B', and 'C' as that old sign below there says – and turn the upper dial up to 'one,' the first white notch – put that right by the white mark on the counter next to the dial, I mean. It goes clockwise."

"What-wise?" Avery had wheeled over to the counter and followed the odd-sounding, to him, directions. "Oh, I see. The wheel. It can't go to the left, so it goes right."

Selk was consulting his papers. "Now, the old computer system used gee-pee-ess, which is long gone, but the backup uses lat-long, so –"

Avery finally lost patience. "Mr. Selk, could you just tell me what to do? We've got a war to fight out there."

"Sorry, sir. Reach for the second dial, lower left –"

"This one? It's got three of the wheel things."

"Yes, sir, degrees, minutes, and seconds. I've already set the outer two dials for you, so just work the little one. The big one is set on forty-four, the middle ring is fifty-four."

"What about the wheels on the right?"

"Those are east-west. This one is north-south."

"Now you're saying things I think I understand. Latitude and longitude it is, then?"

"Yes, sir. Now crank the inner dial – slowly – till it says seventy-five."

Avery turned the smallest dial, about ten centimeters in diameter, gently to the left. "Done. How do we know it's doing anything?"

Mary cut in. "There wouldn't be much to see yet, my lad; we're at some unit, say one thousand watts, of power on site, from forty

thousand kilometers away, aimed at a high point in the Coast range. If Mr. Selk's reading these papers properly." She grinned.

Avery glanced at her; these two had obviously gone through this exercise before, and were grandstanding. Well, they had a right; and it was an encouraging sign. He'd play along.

Selk checked the oscilloscope, and seemed to be satisfied with what he saw there. "Next we have to do east-west. Let's move the outer dial to one-twenty-three and the middle one to twenty-one."

"Done."

"Now the inner one to *fifty*-one."

"Got it. I have a feeling that's around here somewhere; what have you two set me up to see?"

"Wait, sir. Let's go back to the upper dial and power up to fifty."

"This is fifty?"

"Yes, the first red notch."

Avery twitched the black dial.

"Now, if you'll come to the window, sir." Selk walked over and retrieved the big binoculars.

Avery rolled along the counter and took the glasses. "Where do I look?"

"Out past the Highway of Death, a little north of due west."

Avery knurled the focus knob, sharpening a glimpse of a familiar sight – the van of a large truck from the bygone era, with the letters "K", "I", "N" and "S" in stylized black still showing on the faded and peeling paint, over a gleam of everlasting aluminum. Clouds hung low over the surrounding hills, but the view of the valley was unobstructed and the 'seeing' was decent. He swept on past the Highway out to the North-Running River.

Nothing. Nothing at all. Disappointment rose in his throat like gorge.

Wait! White smoke? No, steam! A gout of steam rose and floated leisurely away to the south through the autumnal trees. It was as if – no, it was *fact*, presented to him by his half-disbelieving eyes. Starvation Ridge was boiling a tiny patch of the river, almost twenty-five kilometers away. And could presumably do the same – anywhere?

He handed the binoculars to Selk and turned to Mary.

"What's the angle of attack here?"

"Excuse me?"

"How steep is the beam?"

"Oh! In this part of the world, it's always gonna be twenty nine point five eight degrees."

"So there are things it can hit, and things it can't?"

"It depends on the material on-site," said Mary. "Leave it trained on a mountain long enough, it can bore through to the valley beyond, betcha."

"What is this thing's reach? Japan to Europe?"

"No, there are, or were, three of them. To the satellite the disk of the Earth occupies only seventeen degree of arc. This one is pretty much North and South America, and Hawaii ... Malvinas, South Georgia ... maybe the Azores."

"Some of that means nothing to me. But, say we wanted to hit – I don't know, Argent –"

"Argentina?"

"Right, thanks – from here, now, we could do it?"

Mary leaned back in her chair and regarded Avery coolly. "Mm-hmm."

Elsa opened her mouth, then closed it, her face ashen.

Avery wheeled round to face Mary's protégé. "Mr. Selk, give everyone a turn with the binoculars and then shut this thing off – seems wasteful, burning a river." Avery rolled to the table and surveyed the pile of papers. An odor of old, musty leather permeated the air. He drummed his fingers on the table, then teased a printout out of the middle of the pile. Rows of numbers, entirely meaningless to him, marched across the page. He looked up. He'd felt Savage Mary's eyes were boring into him, and he wasn't mistaken. "Dr. Mary, how long has this young man been able to read – interpret and apply – this kind of thing?"

"I've been working on him for years," she chuckled.

"What's the top increment on that upper wheel?"

"It's expressed in exponents. We think the top red notch is one hundred thousand."

"And we're boiling off running water at *fifty*?"

Mary cracked her knuckles. "Yep."

Avery exhaled, placing his hands palm down on the table. "Let's have Mr. Selk pack away as much of this into the valise as he doesn't need for present operations, and take it to the Ridge incinerator. With a *witness*. I want explosives up here, and also down by the reactor, wired to go, with trigger switches centrally located. If that pack of yahoos out there gets inside this facility and shows any likelihood of winning, I want every person who attended this meeting, myself included, dead, and any chance of Magee using that space thing *permanently* interdicted. I think no one can object to this; we all understand what we're sitting on here."

A slow smile of almost wicked pleasure creased Mary's face. "My thoughts are much like your own, Captain Murchison. If we fail to save the Creek, the *least* we can do is save the world."

∴

Wolf had realized he would not have time or means to dry the

horsemeat and wolf meat properly. The weather was uncooperative, there was no salt, and he'd been concerned about advertising his location with a plume of smoke. So he'd scattered the bones of the horse and stretched the skins and left them to stink themselves dry as best they might, above the reach of most predators, well away from "his" cache. The bulk of the meat he'd sunk in the pool below the waterfall, in case he might have to come back for it.

At dawn on the third day, he'd struck out vaguely east, toward the River, wearing a heavy packboard and carrying his bow and the little rifle on opposite sides of his load. The stiff wolfskin he'd stretched over the load, for such shelter from the intermittent rains as it might afford.

His plan, given the weight of the load, the evanescence of his burden in the cool but not cold-enough weather, and the relative scarcity of game, was to gorge himself. Every few hours, he stopped in a likely-looking sheltered place with good visuals, unshipped the packboard, and set to work slicing increasingly rank steaks from his burden. If he bulked enough, he reasoned, a few days' starvation at the end of this affluence might not weaken him enough to present a problem – in the short run.

More of an issue at present was water. The streams he'd come across were in bad shape, mostly dry washes with here and there an evilly-slimed puddle. A few dead animals near some of these – one of which appeared to have thrashed itself to death in the undergrowth – left him with a distinct impression that toxins were present.

He'd have to locate a well.

Wolf was not fond of wells in general, because they were found near houses, and houses had a way of attracting visitors. Nine-tenths of success in conflict or rather avoiding conflict, he'd begun to think, consisted in not "being there." But when ya gotta, ya gotta. Wolf struck an overgrown road as he was thinking on these matters, and instead of slipping uneasily across, turned and followed it to the nearest mailbox.

This one had been painted light green and bore the stenciled legend "Hodgkins 939021." It now lay on its side, partially buried in mud, amid a riot of vinca, the long-dead spring flowers of which lent an air of melancholy to the sight. Of more interest to Wolf, there were no footprints in the mud, which had long ago washed across what would be the driveway. The house could not be seen from here, meaning that he could not be seen from the house – a good sign. He'd have a look-see.

Stashing his packboard in the middle of a thicket of Scotch broom, Wolf released the rifle and slung it over his shoulder, removing an old foam earplug from the end of the barrel as he did so. Next he took in hand his bow and quiver, felt for the knife handle at his waist, and

crawled, agonizingly slowly, at a distance from and parallel to the driveway, until the outlines of a house came into view.

Its appearance was reassuringly nasty. Windows broken out, door hanging half awry, vines and creepers grown over the roof. Aquamarine-painted aluminum siding had popped off in several places, exposing shreds of the ubiquitous stuff hugely labeled "Tyvek," with an underlayment of sodden pink insulation. An elderberry bush had found its way through the flooring of the mudroom or living room, whichever it might be, and was protruding lushly from one of the windows.

Wolf waited, watched, and listened. Patience being a virtue. And all that.

∴

Karen stood morosely over the impromptu incubator. She poked a finger at little Allyn's fuzzy cheek; he twitched, eyes half open, and nuzzled at her finger, trying to suck. "Is he even getting any bigger?"

"Sure," said Marleena. "But it is slow with the preems, you cannot really tell." She put down the sleeping Arda and came over. "What is it, you've been staring at him ever since you came in, as though he might bite you."

She kindly refrained from mentioning that Karen had arrived with red eyes and a swollen nose.

"I've hit a rough patch. So it's nothing; lot rougher patches around here."

"Well, you do look – 'bushed', Dr. Mary would say. Would you like me to get you something to eat?"

Karen started. "No!" she replied, more forcefully than she intended.

Marleena was taken aback, and took refuge in checking on Arda again – an excuse, as the child was sleeping soundly, for once.

Karen rubbed her shoulder where the arm was missing. Sometimes it seemed as if it ached – the arm that wasn't there. Then she poked again at her ungainly child, who seemed to wave her off with his tiny hands. "I'm ... I'm sorry, Marleena, I've been told something about myself – my past. I found it hard to take, that's all."

Marleena sat down in the nearest folding chair and picked up a skein of wool and began carding. "Do you want to sit down? You have been standing there a long time."

"No. It's all right."

"About food, you must eat to feed the child."

"I know." Karen rested her chin on the aquarium's back strip. She placed the back of her hand against Allyn's spine and rubbed him gently. "Just not yet."

"Is it about food, then?"

"Oh, I wish it wasn't."

"I think I understand you. Listen, it's all live or die all the time. Every minute everyone is closer to death."

"Yes."

Marleena tugged away at the work. "Karen – there is a reason there are Roundhousers at all, you know. Sometimes, we made *choices*."

"You too?" Karen rounded upon her. "This is everywhere?"

"It was. With us, before my time. Since then we have been more fortunate, but just barely, thank the Lord."

Deela walked in. "Ah, Karen, you are here. Marleena." He sat in a chair near Marleena and peeked into Arda's box, smiling. He then looked up at Karen. "I have sought you out."

Karen made an effort to smile, but gave it up. "We're all about the nursery now."

"Dr. M, she quoted something as to that. 'A man, even when he holds a baby, sees and thinks of the world. A woman, while she may be one who sees and thinks of the world, when she holds a baby, sees and thinks only baby.'"

"She's saying I've lost focus on the Armory."

"I will be frank. Karen, you *have* lost focus in – on – the Armory; but it was very good timing. You have greatly helped the Creek and we fight at a safer range with your twenty-two primers. And now I have learned from you, and my shotgun shells are functional. It is really very right to set aside these things for your child's sake."

"You're being kind."

"No, I am here to tell you something, and Marleena as well."

Both women leaned forward involuntarily.

"Good," said Deela, his white teeth flashing in his ebonite face. "I have the attentions. It is like this. Selk and I and several others have been set to running wiring for explosives. We are putting much of our remaining powder inside the counter of the Control Room and in the control panel room of the Reactor Room, fourth level."

"Whatever for?" asked Marleena, standing up. "That sounds like a plan for mass suicide!"

"Some suicide, perhaps, yes, as I understand, a last resort should it come to that. But not so very mass. Karen, I must ask, can the littlest one travel?"

"I ... we keep him comfortable as we can, here." She pointed to the glass-walled contraption. "I suppose I could park him in a sling bag and *try*. Certainly we don't want to raise these children next to a couple of bombs!"

"I would say, yes, think toward 'try'. I have been quietly dispatched by Dr. M. to remind you of a conversation she says she had with you recently. And to encourage you to gather as many others as can travel, to begin preparing such things as they might need."

Seeing, hearing, and feeling no activity around the house, Wolf approached, arrow drawn, treading carefully. He negotiated an obstacle course of large plastic toys that had become brittle over time and covered with brambles – excellent noise and entanglement traps – and gingerly stepped in past the half-unhinged storm door. Clearing from room to room, he eventually satisfied himself he was alone, and began to give part of his attention to the probable location of the well. There had to be one, unless there was a town closer than he thought. Noting there was no pumphouse in the back or side "yards," he investigated what had clearly been the laundry room, and by following the exposed PVC pipes, discovered the well in a closed cupboard beneath shelves full of rat-soiled sheets and towels.

Luck was with him once again. He'd feared the well would hold an immersion pump – such, built to fit within the well casing, could block access unless removed – a formidable task. Virtually impossible with an indoor well. But this pump was of the exposed variety, sitting next to the wellhead with two rubbery-looking pipes connecting it to the well cap. The well casing, what he could see of it, looked to be about twenty centimeters in diameter. The pipes could be quickly sawn through with his hacksaw blade. Only a single bolt, through a hole in a kind of clamp wrapped round the well cap, separated Wolf from access, assuming, of course, the well had not gone dry in the long drought. .

Wolf repaired to the garage, two rooms away, assessed what tools had not vanished over time, and returned to the laundry room with a heavy, rust-red pipe wrench and a small hydraulic jack.

After cutting through the pipes, he tried the bolt with the pipe wrench, finding it, as expected, rust-frozen. Adjusting the jaws of the wrench to obtain the tightest possible fit round the hexagonal head of the bolt, he lifted the jack, laid it on its side, and cranked its handle to wedge the jack between the cinder-block outer wall and the end of the wrench handle.

Several slips and adjustments later, Wolf found the handle's sweet spot and was able to turn the bolt. He lifted the well cap and sniffed. An impression of clean dampness – wishful thinking? – wafted from below. Well, he'd just have to try it out.

Rummaging through the relatively empty structure, he found a tall and skinny-enough empty orange plastic bottle, labeled Wisk, which he filled with enough pebbles from outside to sink it, and tied a long telephone cord to the handle. This he lowered alongside the pipes in the well till he ran out of telephone cord, and finished off his well-rope with a length of moldy clothesline from outside. Presently there came to Wolf's hands a bottle filled with pebbles and cool water.

Mad with thirst as he was, he dared not drink this first liter or so – too much soapy residue. Regretfully he shook the bottle for an agonizingly long time, poured it off, and repeated his procedure.

Just as the fourth bottleful of water, hopefully potable, came to light, Wolf heard movement among the brambles and debris, by the driveway.

Someone was approaching the front of the house!

Not at all cautiously – the confidence of an armed fool. Wolf set down the precious water and took up his bow and quiver, stringing the bow and fitting an arrow in one smooth maneuver. He glanced at the rifle leaning against the wall – no, better to rig for silent running. No knowing how many others might be nearby.

The footsteps were in the living room. Now came the sounds of a cursory investigation: items of erstwhile furniture prodded, tipped, turned out. Whoever it was would be as new here as himself. Wolf padded into the dark hallway and drew, aiming for the doorway from the living room.

A man, smaller than himself, and carrying a rifle with his finger in the trigger guard, came in from the better lighting of the living room, momentarily silhouetted from behind. Sensing that something was wrong, he threw the weapon to his shoulder.

Wolf's arrow was at full draw. He loosed it into the silhouette and ducked back into the laundry room, drawing another arrow as he did so. An explosion of curses filled the hallway, followed by explosions from the rifle. Semiautomatic! Wolf threw aside the bow and hugged the floor, scrambling for his carbine.

Amidst the mind-numbing racket, holes appeared in the wallboard above Wolf's head, one after another in rapid succession. Gouts of fluff sprayed him, like a miniature snowstorm, and the gypsum got into his eyes and nose. One shot – five – twelve? Seventeen? He lost count. If this was going to be a full size magazine, there could be another row of holes closer to the floor, for good measure. Time to get out.

Crawling, belly pressed to the floor, Wolf snaked his way across to the next doorway and practically ran on his knees and elbows to the kitchen, as the fusillade continued. Bullets were penetrating the cinderblocks in the far wall – not a good sign. Racking a three-fifty-seven into the chamber of the carbine, Wolf reached the doorway to the hall and waited.

The shooting abruptly stopped, followed by the click of the magazine being dropped. Such a wasteful shooter must surely have more magazines – now or never! Wolf kicked the door, found his target slumped against the wall, fired, pumped, fired again, pumped, and fired again. The smoking rifle that had hunted him through the walls fell to the floor, and the arms that had held it sagged, hands

twitching.

Wolf approached the shadowed figure, judged its fighting capacity permanently impaired, and delivered a kick to the head just for safe measure. The man, groaning, fell away toward the rifle, but made no move to reach for it. Wolf squatted, carefully avoiding the protruding arrow in the stranger's back, and patted him down for weapons. He removed and tossed into the living room a gleaming chromed pistol and a black-handled knife. He stood up, strode over to the rifle, and kicked it into the laundry room. Stooping for the clothesline rope he'd used down the well, he untied it from the phone cord, returned to his moaning prisoner, and roughly tied his hands and feet. The piteous keening rose in volume.

"Oh, shut up."

"Uhh, what, I'm dead already, lemme alone." A *kid's* voice.

"Y'don't sound dead. You lie here nice'n quiet, I got things t'do."

"Water? Water!"

"I effin' wish. Be quiet or I kick y'again." Wolf picked up his carbine, racked another round into the chamber, and cleared first the house, then the yard, trying to catch his ragged breath. That had been a *near* thing. If this gun-happy child had buddies, it could be far from over.

Not until he'd seen an unconcerned crow perch nearby, whetting its beak on a sagging branch, did Wolf return to the house, habitually scanning his surroundings as he went.

His first order of business would be to see to the weapons. He came to the knife – a Buck – and tested the blade. Sharp – no rust – and oiled! He raised it to his nose. Dust from the wallboard permeated his nostrils, but he believed he could smell – what? He sniffed again. Gun oil! The real thing. Jamming the knife into the wall, Wolf moved to the pistol and picked it up.

It was heavy as a boat anchor, clearly also well oiled, in custom walnut grips. Some kind of awkwardly-shaped nineteen-eleven. He checked the engraved inscription. Sure enough, a Coonan! Three-fifty-seven! These things had been made, in small numbers, as playthings for rich conservatives. He racked the slide. Empty. Magazine empty too. The kid had held onto it, hoping against hope to find ammunition that would fit. And he, Wolf, in the middle of nowhere, was carrying enough of the right ammunition, in good prime, to fill that magazine eight times over. Wolf the Lucky!

Something about the Coonan bothered him, though. What was it?

Carrying the pistol, he walked into the dim hallway, stepped over the prostrate form of the youth, and entered the laundry room. As he suspected, a variant on an em-sixteen. No, more of an ay-arr-ten. Shoving the pistol in his rawhide belt, he picked up the black rifle, surprisingly heavy for its compact size, even with no magazine

attached. He fingered the manufacturer's mark: a rearing, grinning rattlesnake. Huh. In caliber three-oh-eight! No wonder it had punched through the cinder blocks. A nice thing to have, with far more striking distance and penetration than his little Israeli pump gun. He rolled it over, and disappointment struck him in the gut. Wolf the Sometimes *Not* So Lucky.

He'd apparently shot the weapon out of the boy's hands, hitting it not once but twice. A ragged hole in the magazine well and a horrid dent in the receiver told the tale. In all probability this thing would take too long to fix, with the tools at hand, to be worth the effort.

Standing the battered relict against the wall, Wolf felt again the unease with which he'd examined the pistol. Time for a conference.

He stuck his head into the hallway. "Y'still breathin'?"

"Uhhnh."

"Oh, good! Come an' hang out wi' me a bit." Approaching the youth, Wolf laid hold on the collar of his well-made shirt, and dragged him into the laundry room. "I'd sit ya up but y'liable to pass out on me with all that blood out 'n the hall."

"Water?"

Spying a strange cup tucked by its handle into the young man's tooled leather pistol belt, Wolf retrieved it. Turning it over, he found the words "Sierra Club" stamped in the base. What kind of club outfitted its warriors with fancy, shining, tippy-looking cups? He poured from the Wisk bottle into the cup, drank it off, and poured another cupful, holding it to the young man's lips.

The youth drank greedily.

What a kid! Beard, ponytail, and earrings! Fancy clothes head to foot! Too bad about all the holes in him. What stories he might tell. But they had maybe half a hand together before this boy would depart, or Wolf was no judge of wounds. "Better?" he asked, in his kindest manner.

"Yes-s ... more?"

"Sure. But that's it for now; it's hard work bringing this stuff up an' you're wearin' my well rope."

"Sorry."

"No prob." Wolf pulled the pistol, dropped the magazine into his palm, turned it over, and began loading it methodically. The kid, damaged as he was, eyed the clean ammunition hungrily.

"Y'know," Wolf said softly, "if y'd backed out of th' hall an' offered t' parley, I mighta been inclined thataways. Oh, well. So, tell me. Where ya from, an' why the *eff* are ya carryin' items from my personal gunstore?"

∴

"All of them?" Magee seethed inwardly, but kept his exterior calm.

"Yessuh, not a one of th' savages is any where abouts. De-camped in th' night *entire*." Jahn grimaced and spat into the yellow mud at their feet.

"Well, they being them, and other matters in hand, we'll not pursue. You've otherwise proved up the command?"

"Suh, ever'one fed, watered, lectured, jazzed up, geared up, and loaded for bear."

"You are a jewel, my lad; and these are all my drivers with you?"

Several men stepped forward.

"Good morning, boys. We are going straight in, no more asslin' around. Remember what Jahn told you; kill all males on sight; incapacitate or capture females. Stay behind the Cat, tank, and dish truck at all times. We will use the dish intermittently at a very low setting to upset things on the battlefield; it will give Mullins and Lockie a headache but I want th' rest of yah's alert and active.

"Have your crossbowmen use th' firing ports and stay in th' trucks until three long blasts on the dish truck horn. Anythin' happens to us in th' dish truck, so as not to be able to signal, command devolves upon the Doctor here in truck two; then upon Jahn in truck four."

He met pairs of eyes round the semicircle, one by one. "Much depends on each of yah's. Oh, do try to dispose of Mullo and Lockie before making any kind of a withdrawal, please. Personal favor. But as we have stressed several times since our arrival, nothing really is awaiting us in Roseburg any more; we brought it all with us and supplies of that are *dwindling*. We will invest this place as we have *no* viable alternatives." Magee pointed in the general direction of Starvation Ridge. "That way lies an endless supply of electricity, of shelter, and, with any luck, procreation."

He looked into their faces and found sufficient resolve there; everyone knew the wretched condition of the lands through which they had passed. The advantages of a winter spent here, even with little prospect of food, far outweighed those of any place they had seen.

Magee put his thumbs through his red suspenders. "Don't have no better speech for ya, but plenty of action is on offer in its place. S'good?"

Several voices replied, with variations on "S'good, boss!"

"Well, then, mount up an' fire 'em up! We're just burnin' daylight here!"

∴

The phone rang. Avery, who'd been asleep in his chair, snapped to

attention and picked up.

"Mmh? Over."

"Sir, s'Billee. They're coming. Over."

"Coming *where*? To you? Details! Over."

"No sir, to *Bridge*. We think it's *all* of them, crawler, gunship, the dish thingy, and eight more armored trucks. They are making awfully good time for how mucky it is down there. Over."

"Copy. Is Emilio down to Bridge yet? Over."

"Should be by now, sir, left in the middle of the night. Shall we go down and join the fight, sir?"

"Bee, I assume you've got your finger off the button? Over."

"Oh, sorry, sir, *over*."

"So, hate to bug you of all people about this, but, any sign of Wilson? Over."

A painful pause. "No, sir. Over."

"Leave Ro-eena by the phone to coordinate with me, and somebody to watch over her, and bring everyone else you've got to the battle. Over."

"Y...yes, sir. Over."

"Out." Avery reached for the doorbell buzzer and rang twice. With any luck, someone would be by the phone at the rifle pits. There was; with no delay he heard Emilio's voice on a much cleaner connection than the line to Ball Butte.

"We're already listening, Mr. Murchison. Over."

"No less expected, Mr. Molinero. Is everyone bright eyed and bushy tailed? Over."

"We have made all possible preparations. I have command on the south side of the road, and Mr. Josep on the north side. Over."

"We sent you all but a skeleton crew yesterday, as you know. Karen is pulling together an evacuation; they will head up the Creek and if these bastards get through you, *don't* make for here; go up the Creek. We'll keep them occupied. Understood? Over."

"I follow you, sir. But ... "

"Leggo that button! Are you there? I repeat: if the fight comes up here, *do not follow it*. Over."

After several clicks of the primitive phone system had butted heads, Emilio's voice came through again. "Understood," he said resignedly. Obviously he was concerned about Juanita. "Over."

"Good. Now, and this is important, the weapon we all heard about, it's real, it's running, it's dangerous, it's unwieldy as all get-out, we *will* use it, but it can cause friendly fire casualties; we can only see what we're doing through Ball Butte. Keep everyone well back from the road for as long as you can, hopefully until you hear from us again. Copy? Over."

"Copy ... what will be the effects? Over."

"We're not even sure. You won't see a beam, but some things may get sliced and diced in interesting ways. It will come from behind Ridge, maybe about a thirty degree angle. There could be, I dunno, falling trees and shit. Or there could be nothing at all; we don't know how much juice this thing has left in it, or how robust the connection. Just stay the *eff* out of its way if you can. Over."

"We will do as you advise. Based on what Mrs. Wilson has said, I will estimate the enemy will arrive here in about one hand. Or less. Over."

"Well there's a chance they'll huff around to the south and try to hit us from the homestead again. But I don't think so; I think this is it. Over."

"It most assuredly is. I must go now, I think. Over?"

"Yeah. And, uhh, Jeeah be with you. Over and out."

Avery reached for the button again, to try for Ro-eena; but he felt presence. Looking round, he found Mary, in her chair and Selk, standing, busying themselves with the console.

Selk turned his owlish eyes upon Avery, smiling grimly. "Ready when you are, Captain."

...

Karen sighed. Too much to do, too many things that ought to be done and no way to do them. Try as she might to consider herself complete as she was, she felt the situation slipping out of control. *A left hand would be nice right now.*

She pointed to the two Roundhousers – a boy and a girl – that had been considered too young to fight – which was very young indeed, as even the Perkins kids were out there somewhere, armed to the teeth.

"You, and you."

"Ma'am?" said the nearest, putting down a squirming puppy.

"Childhood's over. You just grew up. Get your bows – you do have bows? Good – your arrows, *one* blanket, *one* knife, any food not nailed down, rain cloak, water skin or bottle, a change of clothes if you have one, *one* pair of spare sandals, any kind of fire starter, sewing kit, and anything valuable to a winter traveler – sunglasses, say, for snow. Make a blanket roll. Go to each adult on this level and show them the contents of your blanket roll and say: 'Karen says we're all going on a long hard trip. Pack like this. Travel light.' Repeat, please."

"Karen says we're all goin' on a long hard trip. Pack like this. Travel light." In unison!

"Very good." Karen admired Roundhouse discipline, not for the first time.

One of the kids turned toward the puppy who was scampering away. "What about Dough Go?"

"Dough Go will come with us; dogs are valuable."

At this they brightened; but then the girl's face clouded. "As food?"

Karen steeled herself and paused to get the tone right, truth with some empathy. "*Everything* is food; I've had trouble coming to terms with that myself. But with any luck at all, Dough Go will have a long and happy life bringing *you* good things to eat and watching over you. Now, hop."

Karen moved to the stair well and ran up to the next level. A number of people were in the refectory, spooning at bowls of thin gruel or simply raising the bowls to their lips to sip. These were all elders, Mrs. Lazar and Mrs. Chaney among them, with Juanita presiding over them from the kitchen door. She locked eyes with Karen and nodded.

Karen stood on tiptoe in the entrance and cleared her throat. "My friends all, if I may have your attention."

Bowls were set down and eyes turned her way, some bright, some rheumy. Behind Juanita, Karen could see Mrs. Josep, carrying Karen's own tiny baby wrapped in a towel.

"The war is about to enter its final phase, we think. Almost everyone that can or should go to Bridge has done so. All the youngs and middles downstairs are packing up for a winter journey on foot. Should this take place, it will likely be a long, cold, wet, hard slog.

"Ridge is going to defend itself. Those who don't feel up to joining the trek should consider whether they can join the defense here. Travelers are going to assemble by the staircase in about two hands and make for the sally port. Who wants to go, who wants to stay?"

"I'll certainly stay, my dear," smiled Mrs. Lazar. "My time is about over, and maybe you will provide me with a trigger to pull."

Mrs. Chaney looked at Mrs. Lazar as if to say something, then thought better of it. A few Roundhouse elders nodded, apparently in agreement with Mrs. Lazar. The rest did what was pretty much left to them in life: they waited.

Mrs. Chaney made up her mind. "Ava, I'm sure you and everyone will want to consult with Karen as to what's left of the Armory. May I have her for a few minutes first?"

"Of course, dear. We'll be finishing up our grand repast. And I *do* mean grand," she added, looking across to Juanita. "I simply don't know how you do it."

"The condemned Creek ate a hearty meal'," Juanita replied. "It's the very last of the seed wheat, with spices. And, probably, knowing where it was kept, radioactive."

"Least of our worries. We do thank you – proceed, Elsa."

Mrs. Chaney swept Karen in to the Infirmary, next door. On a cot near at hand Tom lay sleeping.

"You will need a medicine kit. I'd go," Mrs. Chaney attested

wistfully, "and be the 'medicine woman,' as I'm still pretty hale, I think. But I'm not leaving Tom, of course. You, and probably Juanita and Marleena, know most of what I know anyway." She opened a cabinet. "Oh, Jeeah help. There's ... not much here."

"That's all right, Mrs. Chaney."

"No, it's not. Here's needles, sutures – what's this stuff? Cottonwood infusion. A couple of good pairs of scissors and a forceps. Some almost pure wood alcohol. Infusion of plantain. Some powdered goldenseal."

A creak sounded behind them. They turned to find Tom Chaney trying, and failing, to sit up.

"Oh, Tom, please, take it easy," Elsa remonstrated.

"To what end?" He rolled his head on the pillow. "Karen, I see, you're going ... to head out soon. The new Moses."

"Sir." Karen could think of nothing else to say.

"Quite appropriate. There is something ... you could do for me – for Elsa and me, if she will allow it. I know she's unwilling to head for the hills, and she's right – not ... as strong as she thinks she is ... for one thing," he chuckled, watching his wife's reaction. "So I want to be able to ... defend her. Got ... anything I can manage?"

Karen ransacked her head for the Armory's dwindling choices.

"Yes, sir, I think I do."

"All ... in good time." His breathing came in little gasps between the words. "Finish your other business there, and see us if you can before you go."

"Understood, sir." She turned, blinking away her blurring vision, and focused on Mrs. Chaney. Elsa took a deep breath, and returned her gaze to the almost emptied cabinet. "Some bandages are most of what's here; I should think you'd be better off not burdened with them."

"I see one thing we really should have, ma'am," replied Karen.

"What's that?"

"The roll of duct tape."

...

Lockerby's teeth – such as he still had – rattled in his head. Like many, he'd suffered through a number of amateur extractions already.

"Builds character," The Doctor would smile. Somewhere behind him, he knew, she was riding in relative comfort, with her vials and syringes – the ultimate enforcer, as terrifying in her way as the mysterious dish atop the truck Magee was driving.

Bouncing uncomfortably on the seat, Lockerby gave the Cat three-quarters throttle, keeping the cable taut to the LAV in tow behind. He held onto both control sticks of the D-8, watching the road ahead through the relatively tiny slit in the cage's forward armor. He could

see over the raised blade, but barely. His shotgun rider, a taciturn youth, held on for dear life. The shotgun itself, Mullins' much beloved Mossberg, clattered to the floor.

Lockerby considered diving for it himself, but realized he had no chance of changing the game. His foot was chained to the floor. "You wanna pick that up and get a better grip on it? I know you've already racked it; that thing could go off and mess us up in here."

"S'sorry." The kid reached for it, still holding on with his other hand.

Ahead, Lockerby could see the Creek bridge beyond the intersection; maybe fifteen seconds away. He wondered idly what "seconds" once were; Magee had tried to explain it once but finally had fallen back on a rule of thumb; "just count 'em; say 'one thousand one, one thousand two,' like that. Close enough."

One thousand thirteen, one thousand fourteen. "Hard left; hang on." He slammed the left lever back and tried to watch ahead and behind at the same time, hoping not to take up too much slack on the cable at once.

To the rear, Mullins was already cranking the turret manually in order to commence file firing. Lockerby shouted to his passenger over the roar of the diesels. "You got those chewed leaves in your ears like I showed you?"

"Yeah, why?" the youth asked sullenly. "Open your mouth wide." Lockerby demonstrated.

"What?"

The thirty-five went off behind them. Light flashed in the trees ahead, on the left, and there was a sodden thump of ordnance exploding in wet foliage.

"Ow!"

"Told ya; helps save yer eardrums." The turret behind them was cranking the other way. "Again."

"Aaah!" The kid's shout, half terror, half bravado, would protect his hearing nicely.

The cannon opened up on the right. No response from the farmers. Perhaps all the starch had gone out of them – was this going to be easy, then?

At that moment an explosion much louder, albeit lower and slower, enveloped Lockerby's small world. The Cat rose up in mid-air, hung at the top of its short arc momentarily, and pitched forward onto the base of its blade. Lockerby held onto the sticks with all his might, but would have been tossed against the armor plating forward, had not his foot been locked down. His companion, having no such luck, bounced forward, caromed off the plates, and fell across Lockerby's lap.

The Cat settled much where it had been before, but in a small crater. Smoke poured in through the slits and the grated flooring. Had

Mullins somehow shot the D-8 while traversing?

Lockerby strained at his fellow's inert form and lifted him away. From the corner of his eye he could see the kid's nose was bleeding



profusely. Perhaps his own was as well. Lockerby's ears rang, but he

could feel the Cat's engine idling. A mine! The road had been mined. If Mullins hadn't welded extra mine protection beneath the power plant and cage, no doubt the machine would have been killed, and its two passengers along with it. He tested the throttle with his foot. A reassuring rumble answered him. Good; now to see if either track was in trouble. Sticks forward; up, out, good!

The kid was moaning. Lockerby swung to the right and shouldered him. "Wake up! Look alive! Things to do here!"

Grinning idiotically, the recruit nodded, picked up the Mossberg and peered out the right-side door slit. "What hit us? What's with the smoke?"

"Never mind. Watch for counter-attack!"

The thirty-five banged again. Lockerby involuntarily braced himself for the rattle of lead on armor, but none came. Where *were* the farmers?

Thunder rolled from somewhere above, and then a thing occurred which made no sense to Lockerby at all.

A narrow ditch appeared along the roadside to their left, spouting dirt and duff, as if the ground were being unzipped. Tree branches fell, smoking, all along the road into the near distance. A man, missing much of his left side, stepped from the shrubbery into the road, screamed once, and fell down.

What *was* that? Lockerby felt sure Mullins hadn't done it.

No time to muse on it, however. Lockerby held the sticks forward; the Cat rumbled over the body in the road, feeling not so much as a bump. The LAV fired to the left and again, shortly thereafter, to the right, jerking at the Cat through the cable with each recoil. Not for the first time, Lockerby wished they had found a way to get the big Bushmaster to run electrically. Manual was just not up to the task here.

Peering through the front slit, Lockerby could see that the "zipper" was coming back. Upper halves of small trees were falling into the road from the right, and dirt – or mud – was spouting up from the gravel berm on the left, like some kind of racing geyser. It would hit the Cat!

It did; but whatever it was seemed to have little penetration. Blobs of steel gouted from the armored engine cover and a steely vapor probed at the slits; but whatever it was had not lingered long enough to cut anything vital. Lockerby held the levers forward; what else could he do?

"Incoming!" shouted his seatmate. The Mossberg snapped to the kid's shoulder; he fired through the starboard gun slit. He racked the smoking red shell out of the chamber and clicked home another.

"What was it?"

"Runner with a Molotov. Got him."

"There'll be one on this side, then! Climb over me!"

Lockerby leaned forward. Knees dug painfully into his back, but his ears were rewarded with another blast from the Mossy. An ejected shell tumbled at his feet.

"Eff, you were right, that was close!"

Something pinged on the armor near the front slit.

"Careful! Stay down!"

But it was too late. The youth sat down, still grinning idiotically, but a tiny third eye had opened in his forehead. Life faded from his eyes. Lockerby noted the location of the shotgun, but kept the Cat roaring forward. The LAV barked again; the Cat shuddered with the recoil.

The giant zipper swept over the armored cage and down the road again; branches flailed into the road, cut cleanly off. A small hole had appeared in the roof; Lockerby became aware of it when a droplet of molten steel fell onto his arm, like dripping solder, and steamed its way into his flesh.

"Eff it! *Eff!*" Lockerby released the levers, then grabbed up the Mossberg and jammed it against them with his good hand. The Cat stalled momentarily, then lumbered forward again. He sucked at the wound on his other forearm for a bit, then dropped the gun and grasped both levers again before the Cat could leave the road.

A small bullet entered the front slit at an angle, then spalled round the interior before landing, spent, on the seat by Lockerby's side. He fought the impulse to stop and return fire. Safety, if it lay anywhere, lay ahead. He peered at the slit.

Branches were showering down again, but from the left. Lockerby felt sure the weapon, for it must be one, was being operated blindly. The Cat would not be hit on this pass. And the end of the woods, open country, lay ahead, with farmhouses visible.

But what was *that*?

Another armored Cat, but much, much smaller, with a wired-up five-gallon bucket tied to its blade and a smokestack at its rear, entered the thoroughfare from a side road. The strange machine turned and advanced, at what was clearly its turtle-like top speed, on the D-8. A suicide bomber! That bucket must surely be another mine.

Lockerby kept on, as if to pass on the right; the other dozer clearly meant to do the same, probably with the intent of turning into the LAV and blowing itself up there. Lockerby felt he had the advantage, however. Just as the Kamikaze came abreast of his blade, Lockerby would snatch back his left lever, brushing the little Cat off into the ditch.

The plan almost didn't come off. At the critical moment, someone (how had they got aboard?) somehow shoved a spear in through the left slit, narrowly missing Lockerby's head. He ducked aside and

snapped back the left lever.

The blade connected! The little Cat rolled over in the ditch! Lockerby had no time to exult – that spearman was still out there, and might shift to another angle at any time. He reached up and snatched at the haft of the spear.

Apparently having recovered, someone snatched back, almost cutting Lockerby's hand. He grabbed up the Mossberg, aimed it at the slit, and fired blindly along the shaft of the spear, disregarding the pellets that ricocheted back, stinging like holy hell.

The spearpoint slowly withdrew. Lockerby racked another shell into the chamber and aimed along the barrel at the slit. Refocusing, he discovered his wounded opponent, falling away out of sight past the tracks.

It was a black woman!

In that moment, Lockerby might have reflected on his career and wondered, briefly, how he had come to this place and time, and whether his choices had been good ones. But several things happened at once.

One was that the giant zipper passed by, making a brief but spectacular splash of someone's blood. Another was that yet another farmer had apparently clambered up the other side of the Cat, and holed him in the back with one of those tiny bullets. He didn't even hear the report of the rifle. Yet another was that, from where he was sitting, Lockerby could see the little Cat lying upended over the roadside ditch, with its upside-down power plant burned off by the Zipper and now in flames. At the front, apparently unscathed, hung the bomb, tightly cabled to the inverted blade. In the smashed cage lay an old man, bald and bearded, smeared with blood, and in his shaking hand he held what looked an awful lot like some kind of plunger switch at the end of a length of wire, with the plunger depressed.

And then the old man lifted his thumb.

Lockerby instinctively ducked away from the window, but was still unprepared for the blast wave when it came. The great Cat rose up and pivoted on its truck-sized blade until it hovered in the flames in which it had become engulfed, then sat down again heavily, upright as before but mortally wounded. Lockerby would have caromed round the interior like a spent bullet, but for the chain round his leg; as it was he was stretched out almost to the roof, then crumpled against the wall, then the floor, and dropped again into his seat. He knew that his nose was bleeding again, and probably his ears as well. He was pretty sure the chained leg had snapped. Darkness crept in round his eyes, but he fought off the tunnel vision long enough to find the shotgun.

There was too much light. Lockerby realized the passenger-side door had been thrown from its latch. He twisted his agonized body and squinted. If the day were sunnier, he wouldn't have been able to

see a thing.

Beyond, from what remained of the woods to the right, a small, round-shouldered man was advancing on the Cat through steaming, burning shrubbery. An arrow, loosed from somewhere behind the LAV, missed him; he came on and disappeared to the left. Probably climbing the hydraulics to get at the cab. In the near distance, a long, low steel-clad building was in flames from shells being pumped into it by the chain gun. Above and behind the building loomed the dark ridge that was the object of Magee's quest.

It didn't look like much.

Eff you and your quest, old fart. Come here and let's talk about your electricity and your "restoring civilization," blah blah blah, "Boss." And then I'll blow your effing head off and join these nice folks here, see if I don't ... Oh! the blossoms in the pear trees! How old was I when I first discovered Spring? Seven, maybe. I think I was seven.

Something scraped on the hot steel. Lockerby could imagine the man's fingers blistering. Singleness of purpose. Perhaps he had family to protect. A weapon, one of those little rifles, came into view, tucked into the left shoulder. The man was trying to take advantage of cover. Nice job! Lockerby had always admired presence of mind. Now the man heaved into view, taking aim. A Mexican?

They both fired as one.

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It was definitely time to hit the headache button. Magee reached for it, but as he did so, the cab roof of his chariot came undone.

Daylight simply appeared through the roof overhead, from the front of the cab to the back, with molten metal running down onto the bulletproof window. The glass, special though it might be, cracked, fell apart, and cascaded into his lap in thousands of iridescent shards.

What the eff was *that*?

Something whined past his face and flattened itself on the passenger side window. Magee had been shot at before; he didn't like it any more now than he had then.

Mullins and Lockerby were going to have to endure some unconsciousness. Magee reached for the dashboard again, this time twisting the intensity control. Four? Five?

An arrow caromed off the doorpost.

Oh, heck, make it six. Buncha half-dead farmers with some friendly casualties, would be preferable to being overwhelmed. He hit the button.

Nothing!

Another arrow plumed in and lodged itself in the padding around the passenger-side doorpost. What had happened to the microwave?

Ahead of him, Mullins was blazing away at farmhouses and what looked like an old sawmill. He'd better start in on that mountaintop soon ... suddenly there was a ruckus in front of the LAV. Some kind of vehicle being rolled over – good one, Lockie – fleeting glimpses of figures assaulting the D8 and the LAV – the D8 jumping into the air again amidst flames – Magee's ears ached with the multiple concussions coming in through the broken window – the D8 burning.

Better check that dish.

He hurriedly swept glass off the windowsill with an oily red rag. Ignoring the possibility of being shot in the back, Magee shimmied out, took a peek, and squirmed back in.

....Well! Something had sliced the dish cleanly off the roof. It lay, about as useful as any of the detritus of civilization, reduced to expensive-looking scrap.

What *was* that weapon?

People were coming toward him, apparently intent on business. He tried to think, but for once felt fresh out of ideas.

Shotgun blasts interrupted Magee's reverie. They seemed to be coming from behind the MRAP. The farmer-warriors fell, one by one. Oh, that would be The Doctor with her AA12-E. He had one himself, of course, in a locker in the back. Last-resort stuff.

She appeared in the window, standing on the running board. "My lord, we *must* advance. The column will be cut to pieces here."

"What the hell hit my dish?"

"There is a focused beam device, laser or maser, my lord. It seems to be sky-based. Low in the south. If we make for the mountain we will be hull-down from it. *Drive!*" The Doctor's upper arm began to bleed; she stepped down and fired again into the near distance. She shouted over her shoulder. "You must drive, *now!*"

"We need the LAV. I'll pull around it; hook me up and tell Mullins to save ammo." He gripped the wheel and set the truck in motion.

The Doctor hopped down. She shook her head. What was the poor man thinking? Without the dish, in front of the LAV, Magee would be too tempting a target for Mullins. She ran, missed by a crossbow bolt, to the back of the immobilized armored vehicle and rapped one of its back doors with the butt of the AA12, three times, pause, three times.

Mullins' guard, a trusted member of her intern crew, opened out the rust-streaked door.

"Stand aside, please," she smiled. Shouldering the heavy weapon with its round drum full of twelve-gauge slugs, she sent one through the gunner's seat, climbed in, and dogged the door shut behind her. Small-arms fire pinged off the exterior. "Run around that mess to the

driver's hatch, climb out, roll down front, and cable this thing up to The Boss's truck, yes? Good!"

He ran to do her bidding, and she winced at the thought that so much might devolve upon so little. The young man could be shot before completing the task. Or the Clevis could already be too hot to handle – a whiff of burning D8 had come in through the door with her. Well, first things first. Leaning the AA12 against the crew compartment wall, tugged Mullins' surprised-looking corpse down from its seat by the Bushmaster, and took his place.

Let's see – little was as it had been when they had first acquired this machine. When the Army ran away, leaving their inexplicably acquired Marine Light-Armored Vehicle behind with so much other stuff, it had been left parked outside the ABC-hardened bunkers. The electro-magnetic pulses, both solar and war-derived, that had so paralyzed the world had made a hash of its electronics. The turret was hand-cranked, the gun bolt-operated, and for a gunsight someone – Mullins, she supposed, as this had been his baby – had found a way to bore through the hull and install a riflescope, which was all right for point-blank warfare but not much help with elevations. Oh, well.

Encouraging noises rang from up front somewhere. The Doctor cranked the turret round to face the northern butte. That would be the artillery observer's position! She raised the barrel with the other crank.

So little ammunition! Mullins had been much too lavish, poor boy. HESH-Ts should not be wasted on peasants in shrubbery. There was a round in the chamber. After checking the chamber, she looked through the scope, shrugged, and gripped Mullin's makeshift trigger. A near-deafening racket, more of a crack than a boom, filled the narrow space around her. As the shell fell among those at her feet, smoking, she went back to the scope to see a point of light, following a tight spiral, rise toward the lookout and blossom into orange flame.

A strange sizzling sound passed over; tiny holes appeared in the roof, and globules of molten steel, stinking, dripped into the interior. Someone screamed outside. This was getting to be a near thing! Suddenly the LAV jerked and began rolling forward, yawing to the left. Better get in the driver's seat and grab that yoke! And she was going to have to be her own "power" steering.

...

"Ro-eena, what have we got? Over!" The heavy old handset, smelling of Bakelite, was slick with Avery's sweat and kept sliding through his hand, away from his ear.

"The beam is on the road, sir, but moving too fast. We should maybe stay in one spot, let them drive through it? Wait, there goes Mr. Jorj! Oh, *eff* it! Jeeah *help* us!"

"Ro-eena! Ro-eena! Are you ..." Avery heard a click; she'd finally lifted her finger from the "send" button. "Ro-eena, focus please. No reporting or evaluation except in relation to the laser. *Over!*"

"I'm sorry, sir, but it's pertinent; the column has stopped. Inch back to the west and you can start burning them. *Over.*"

One click, two, three on the smallest wheel of control C. "How's that? *Over.*"

An uncomfortable pause. Avery almost pressed "send" again, worrying that there had been an attack on the lookout after all, but Ro-eena responded.

"You've *got* one! Next to last in line is burning; they're jumping out. One click is good for about two truck lengths, sir. *Over.* No, wait. Sir, Mr. Jorj –"

"*Report effect. Over.*"

"They're ... they're moving again, sir; five clicks. Oh, stopping; we've overshot them. Come back."

"Back two. Are we hitting anything? *Over.*" *Click.*

Click. "Sir, they're .. uhhhh, gotta go. *Over-r-r.*"

What?

From the corner of his eye, Avery saw a glimmer of flame. He snatched up the field glasses and focused on Ball Butte.

Smoke was coming from all the stone-framed windows of the lookout.

Mary spoke for them all. Slapping both her wheelchair arms with her open palms, she looked up at the ceiling, as if in supplication. "*Dammit.*"

Selk looked over at Avery. "Uhh, sir? We're losing signal on our antenna."

"Power or position?"

"I think it's position. Something must have jiggled the dish."

"Am I still on?"

"Maybe. Keep diddling those dials, and I'll run out and move things around. Doctor Mary can spot both me and the 'scope till we get it right again."

"We shouldn't be opening the sally port right now."

Mary interposed. "It's all we got, Captain."

Avery looked into both their faces. Selk looked back, for once unblinkingly, with an uncharacteristic set to his jaw. Mary simply smiled. Avery turned back to the board and began twisting dials.

"You're both right," he said, over his shoulder. "Have a go, and I'll keep playing my little game here."

Selk departed. Mary rolled to the heavy quartz south window. It had been fouled by the great Fire, but would do for Selk's purposes. Avery's hands hovered over the dials. *If only we'd had time to range*

this thing, fix some co-ordinates! And now he had no idea if it was even working.

South two, swing east to west two at a time, slowly. At a guess, if the thing was still running, this would straddle and destroy the bridge at Hall Farm and perhaps knock down enough timber to block the convoy.

But if there was anything in the world Avery hated, it was the word *guess*.

...

The floor shook beneath them. Karen glanced at the ceiling, but Mrs. Lazar simply stood smiling. Did anything ever faze this old woman? Karen had once prided herself on her detachment; now it seemed the people around her were more comfortable in adversity than she. What had happened to her?

"They're *here* already. I'm going to have to check the availability of the sally port."

"Yes, dear. Do we have time to get what we came for?"

"Oh! yes." Karen reached over the top edge of a tall cabinet and retrieved a burlap bag, heavy at one end. She set it on a countertop, and tugged at the cord around its throat, one-handed.

"May I?" Mrs. Lazar leaned forward.

"Of course, ma'am."

The old lady untied the bag and retrieved two pistols, one large, one small.

"These ... " Karen began.

But Mrs. Lazar had picked up the Glock, expertly dropped the magazine, racked open the action, and looked into the chamber. "How nice. A Glock and, what, an old Kahr?"

"K-Kel-Tec, ma'am."

"The ammunition is stable, then?"

"It was when last tested, ma'am. There's ... not much of it."

"Enough to make one's last moments honorable. I see I have surprised you. When I tried to go to Israel, I hoped to join the IDF. You know? So. Very long ago. I joined the Reserve Officer's Training Corps, as preparation. So, about such as these, I do know a little." Her smile broadened.

Karen found herself smiling back.

Mrs. Lazar tipped her head. "Oh, now, what is this? You have not smiled enough in your life, girl. It looks good on you. I will take the big one, as it is easier for my arthritis. And I will take to Dr. Chaney the little one, yes?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good; go check on your ways and means. The Lord be with you, girl."

Karen moved toward the door. Her hand on the doorknob, she turned and looked back. "And with you, ma'am."

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The two men had climbed much of the afternoon, almost straight up the trail, which consisted of no more than the judicious removal of enough brush and branches to facilitate assaults on the mountaintop. There were no switchbacks, and it was hard going. Their haste was driven by the rattle and thump of explosions ahead. Though their hands were empty of weapons, they had trained, much of their lives, to run toward the sound of warfare.

As they entered the clearing at the top of the Butte, they stopped and surveyed the scene before them carefully. Smoke wisped from the blackened doorway of the lookout, and two bodies lay, very still, on the ground nearby. There were no signs of current or recent activity.

One gestured to the other, and they advanced to the casualties. The leader knelt and examined one, while the other scanned round the perimeter of the open ground. "Who are they?" he asked.

"Elberd an' Ro-eena, dammit. Effin' flies, leave 'er alone." Wilson futilely fanned the air above her open back. *How had it gotten so warm out after all that rain?* There were already rows of tiny white eggs around the edges of the gash.

"They must have been running from the building when it blew."

"Yeah."

"Shoulda gone left, 'stead 'a straight away."

"Y'know, Armon, y'tryin' t' turn over a new leaf, maybe don't say things ... like that ... for a while?"

The big man opened his mouth to speak, then thought better of it; he had, as he well knew, run *straight away*. He hung his head.

Wilson looked up. "Man ... get a grip, no time for that either." He pointed to the doorway. "See if you can salvage anything in there; I'll go through her possibles."

Regret welled up in Wilson; his eyes fogged over and he had to dab at them with the back of his knuckles. This woman, with something like what had been called a photographic memory, had been the Creek's archives. All that had gone, along with a stout heart.

Ro-eena's bag turned up several personal treasures, which he tucked back into her tunic. Remaining were a squat jar of cottonwood salve and an old pill bottle containing twelve rounds of Karen's twenty-twos, packed in dried mint. The bag hung from a belt that also held a sheathed knife. The belt would be too short to use. He unlaced it from its paired rings and slid the sheath and the possibles bag onto the thin grass, then patted away some dirt from Ro-eena's red hair. "Go with Jeeah."

Armon returned from the smoldering building. He piled his small inventory next to Wilson. "Almost nothing. The phone's smashed. Binoculars, same thing. Water was in a glass jug; that broke. Some fruit leathers in a basket. N'this." He held out a single-shot twenty-two with a smashed stock.

"That's Elberd's." Wilson took the little rifle and worked the bolt. A round in the chamber. He ejected this into his palm, held the barrel up to his eye, held his fingernail to the breech, and examined the light thrown into the barrel by the nail. Clean and clear; didn't look bent. He reloaded. "This will do. Was there an axe? We always have an axe here. Shovel, too."

"Splintered."

"Well ... Let's put 'em in through th' window and call that burial, for now. If any of us ever gets back here to collect 'em, things will be goin' better'n I expect."

Standing on either side of the woman's body, which still lay face down, they made a litter of their upturned palms, rolled the stiffened body over, and lifted it. Ro-eena, who had always been slight, was unexpectedly heavy. Did flesh gain weight when spirit fled?

Elberd's end had apparently come in the same moment as Ro-eena's; the back of his head was caved in. The stitches were still in his cheek; what a life he'd had! They lifted him into the window.

Both the men seemed to feel they had done something for the dead by putting the bodies out of sight. Wilson took up the shattered rifle and walked to the southern edge of the Butte; Armon gathered up the other things, after putting the sheathed knife in his sash, and followed.

A small but thriving corner of hell unfolded itself to their wondering eyes.

At their feet, the buildings of Hall, Murchison's, Chaney's, Bledsoe's and Joseph's were in flames. Murchison's was already a burnt-out shell. The smoke from that fire obscured details of the others, drifting slowly up the Creek road to the east. Smoke also rose from innumerable fires along the Road, all the way from Bridge to Hall. Vehicles appeared to be crawling up the Ridge road, attended by desultory gunfire. A geyser of water and steam spouted up from the Creek in front of Bledsoe's, as if a small volcano were erupting there; the steam mixed itself with the smoke from the burning Farms and drew gloweringly away to the east.

Before he could wonder about all the smoking streaks that had appeared in the Creek road, Wilson's eye was drawn to activity on its surface, half hidden in the smoke. Two or more vehicles were burning, and there was fighting around them; Others had moved off up the road toward New Ames, with what had to be Creekers in pursuit. The enemy's forces had been divided and could be tackled piecemeal; in effect the Creekers, on foot, held the interior lines!

"Armon! We're not whipped yet! There's work to be done down there. Y'ready?"

...

The Doctor was not entirely happy. Certainly the ridge was their ultimate objective, as Magee would surely have agreed, in days gone by, but his truck resolutely ground on, chuffing round the switchbacks of the farmers' access road. At least they were now out of the reach of that thing in the sky! But she would have preferred to bring along the rest of the column. No good could come of leaving them among the bedlam that was erupting along that half-dried river below.

Perhaps Magee hoped to gain control of the sky-weapon. That would be a prize indeed, if it proved to have any staying power. Better even than the now-defunct microwave, perhaps. That man had always dreamed of empire.

The problem was, the Doctor reflected, that there was likely not much left of the known world for imperial scope. The Eastsiders were scattered tribals rapidly re-inventing all things Indian, rightly recognizing cowboy culture as ultimately tied to a vanished industrial system. Magee's "Rogue Valley Volunteers" had hit the resource wall and scattered, with about a fourth of them right here in the fight. Who knew what was going on in Port Land? She suspected: not much. They'd displayed surprisingly little reach. And from the scorched south, from whence one might have expected a hundred million Pilgrims, no more than two hundred thousand had ever come north, by her count.

That left this shrinking band of idealistic gentleman farmers, which Magee had no hope of befriending (it was not his style) and less of exterminating (they were proving resourceful). Not much future in pacification campaigns here. And without *someone's* cooperation, the big laser would have no meaningful reach.

Trust Magee not to be thinking that far ahead. Other things being equal, now would be the time for the Doctor to head out. East, perhaps. Or West. Find a boat, get south of the Equator. If such a thing were possible for her.

But the Doctor had a problem; she was tied to electricity. Regulated and in sufficient quantity. It had begun to run out in Roseburg, and would run out here if they could not breach this fort. Life, for the Doctor, lay within this mountain. Despite the continual jouncing, she frowned; stupid LAV! Its engine should be running so that she could plug in.

The vehicles suddenly halted; she could feel the tensioned tow cable slackening. Freed suddenly from the need to grip the steering yoke with both hands, she reflexively reached for her left wrist and

tugged aside the unobtrusive fold of darker "skin" there. She found the tiny still-green glow of the LED reassuring.

Someone banged on the hull. It would likely be Magee; they now had few Volunteers with them. The Doctor rose from the driver's seat to a half-crouch, undogged the driver's hatch, lifted it slightly, and peeked out.

Yep, Magee. And he had somehow found time to climb into his armored suit.

Standard Army issue, the suit had once harbored electronic and nanotech wonders, including a power pack for its exoskeleton, but these things had gone the way of history during the Undoing, falling victim to electromagnetic pulses, of whatever origin. With its titanium VR goggles stripped away, the suit was still handy as full-body armor, but debilitatingly heavy. The Doctor marveled that Magee could still manage it; he looked almost like a slow-moving deep-sea diver. In one hand he carried his cumbersome AA-12E. With the other, he waved and pointed to the chain-gun's barrel overhead and then to the rock face nearby. What had he seen to shoot at there?

Magee walked toward the short cliff as the Doctor watched, fascinated. There was a distraction; someone shouted some sort of war cry on the right and threw a Molotov cocktail at Magee, which fell short, bursting and burning with a dull red glow on the road berm. Magee shouldered his weapon nonchalantly and fired one round, observed the effect for a few moments and lumbered on.

Reaching the mountain wall, he turned, made sure the Doctor was still watching, and patted the stone. Yes. There was something of a rectangle there. A door, then. She dropped the hatch and dogged it, then made for the gunner's position. Crank the turret; crank the gun; rack a HESH-T; reach for the duct-taped trigger.

Anyone watching might have wondered why the Doctor did not bother to put on the hearing protector muffs still on Mullins' head. Perhaps, if she knew they were watching, she would have. Protective coloring meant much in this game. But the Doctor's needs, though always and everywhere urgent, were few.

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Karen, sitting beside Marleena, glanced over and met her eyes, steady and ready. Both the babies had fallen asleep; time to unhook them and pack them up. It would soon be nightfall and time to roll. With an almost silent matched pair of wet "plops," the mothers became individuals again.

As she struggled with her little boy's swaddling, Karen wondered, not for the first time, how she'd drawn this particular billet. The crew she'd assembled consisted of none of her old friends, excepting

Juanita and Errol. Nearly everyone present was from Roundhouse. A stronger division of labor between the sexes, at Roundhouse, might account for it; these were, except for two small boys, almost all women and girls that had, until this war, never held a bow, let alone a rifle. Now they would be carrying, each of them, some weapon; and might have to learn to use it on the run. It was hoped that some of those fighting outside might trail and join them, but the hope carried as much freight as any terror; one look at Juanita's clouded expression told all.

One of the urchins, the one she'd shown to make and demonstrate a blanket roll, stood in the doorway. "Beg pardon, ma'am, all heads counted and all things inventoried."

"Right," replied Karen, distracted by a strip of cloth that *would* insist on covering Allyn's nose and mouth. "How many commons?"

"Two axes, two shovels, two buckets, six tarps. Mr. Errol is showing us where to find things."

"I trust these tarps don't fall apart when handled and are not *blue*?"

"No ma'am," he grinned. "Never seen daylight, and we painted them brown and green like you said."

"Right, so we'll be right there and then we'll all head for the stairwell together."

"Yes'm." He turned to go.

The floor beneath them vibrated. Dust floated free from the ceiling overhead, and a dull thump resounded more in their chest cavities than in their ears. The boy turned to face Karen again, trying to hide his fright.

"You're right," Karen answered his unasked question. "That wasn't up top, that was second level, by the doors."

Another thump. A fluorescent tube in one of the ceiling fixtures popped and showered Marleena and Arda with tiny diamonds and white powder. Marleena snatched up the baby and backed away from the spot. Karen practically tossed little Allyn into his bag on her left hip, then drew the revolver whose holster was now part of that bag. Juanita and Marleena took up their bows.

Feet came running down the stairwell; Karen and the young Roundhouser, bow drawn, stepped into the hall to meet them.

It was Guchi, carrying a shotgun and looking grim. He pulled up in front of Karen. "Mrs. Allyn, they're working on the sally port with that gun. You're not going to be able to go." Another, louder thump punctuated his report.

In a way, Karen was relieved. "Well, then ... " She waved the High Standard meaningfully.

Guchi wasn't finished. "But, uhh, follow me?"

Another raucus thump. White dust plastered their hair as Karen followed Yamaguchi to the refectory's "garderobe." He gestured grandly at the toilet seat.

Not intended for human waste disposal only, the chute was a steel-lined tube through the rock of the mountain, slanting away toward Hall. How it had been used before the Great Undoing, no one remembered, but Ridge had appropriated it as the best means of getting everything compostable down to the great heaps of Hall Farm. Only the dead had been spared this indignity, being carried down ceremonially by ox-cart. The pipe diameter was fifty centimeters, so it was a doable route, though steep.

"Really?" Karen wrinkled her nose, though she was not fastidious by nature. Not the best environment for a newborn, surely.

"Well, yucky, yeah. But we last raked it out about a week and a half ago. Not everybody's been living up here since, so I figure an hour's work for one strong kid. Depends how fast we can bring up the buckets."

"It's latched on the outside – at Hall Farm – right?"

"Yes, but that should yield to some dexterity. It's not really a security thing. Though, maybe – " he shrugged – "it should have been."

Thump. Dust motes leaped from the walls.

"Umm. Okay." Karen holstered the revolver. She looked round. The youngster she hoped might still be in the doorway, had, it turned out, gone her one better, and was standing by her elbow.

"Ma'am."

"Want to do something particularly awful and be a hero?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am." The kid grinned. "Name's Griff."

"Mmh? Oh, to tell your friends where you ..."

"No, ma'am. To remember me by for all time. I'll get me some rope and a bucket."

Thump.

...

"This here thing," said Mary disgustedly, "is no more than a gahdam pearl-handled cyanide pill." She unloaded the tiny "gambler's gun," dry-snapped it experimentally in the direction of the entryway, then reloaded it.

"Here; take this one, then." Avery drew the sawed-off and tossed it to her.

"Hey! That's more like it. But what if I'd dropped it?"

"Well, that would have been risky. But you didn't. Here's extra shells, too. Throw me the little one." Avery caught the derringer and turned back to the console. The room shook. Both their wheelchairs transmitted the shock of the explosion to them. "How many do you

make that?"

"About fifteen. They'll be comin' in, my lad. The doors are good stuff, but not *that* good."

Avery glanced at the destruct button. "We may have to pull the plug soon, then. Where's Selk? Are we in business or not?"

"He went to take a peek, I think. Wups – here he is."

Selk, at the south window, began making gestures. There being no agreed-upon engineering sign language at the Creek, his efforts were randomly understood, but Mary, quicker on the uptake than Avery, undertook to translate.

"The nasties have, he says, divided their forces. Some are still along the road – out in th' open, and worth goin' after! The scope?" She swung around and looked. "Oh, better. Best signal we're going to get." She gave Selk a thumbs-up.

Selk was clearly about to reply in kind, but instead made a small "o" with his mouth and sank slowly out of sight from the narrow window.

A man whom Mary had never seen before appeared, crossbow in hand, drew a knife, and bent towards Selk's location. Mary, in supreme anger and frustration, pointed the sawed-off at the window. She resisted pulling the trigger, however. Nothing that could be fired from a shotgun, let alone "pheasant" loads, was going to reach a foe through nine inches of quartz.

"What's up?" asked Avery over his shoulder, as he reached for the three great dials.

"Sonofabitch effin' got my boy! Now he's standin' right here starin' at me through th' window! Is there a way you can cut him up with that effin' great cheese slicer?"

"No, there's a stop built in, to keep it off our position evidently. I'll just have to hope I can hack up some trucks instead." Avery twiddled dials minutely. "Sorry about your engineer," he added softly. "Good man."

The enemy soldier seemed distracted. He backed away from the window, looked down, and withdrew a screwdriver from his abdomen. With his other hand he explored his middle for a moment, then looked at his darkened palm, then again at the screwdriver. He threw it away, obviously cursing, and then walked aimlessly off.

"A *damned* good man," said Mary, putting her hand against the wall where Selk's poor body must be.

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This, thought Magee, is more like it.

He stepped through the stinking air where the cleverly-made (and surprisingly strong) door had been, and found himself in an

artificially-lit interior. No sooner than he had taken four laborious strides forward, however, than he was rocked back by a blast from nearby – buckshot, by the feel of it.

Yet more acrid smoke soured the air.

Huh – black powder shotshells. More evidence of manufacturing activity. An exciting prospect. A brief image of himself explaining the advantages of a joint venture tickled his imagination, but then the suit took another bruising hit. Even with the blast-protection plugs in his ears, Magee found himself developing a headache. He'd better locate and neutralize the threat, before they thought to aim for his visor.

There – the sound of another shell being racked into a chamber. A woman near a service area of some kind – stairwell and elevator shaft. Just like old times. The weapon was still at her shoulder and aimed, as he expected, a little higher than the first two shots. Magee turned away, almost staggering as the balls, still clustered together, pounded the back of his helm. He swung back to return fire, only to see his assailant cut down by a blast from behind him.

"My lord, are you well?" The Doctor, suited up and armed with her own AA-12, stepped through the wreckage of the sally port. To make herself heard without suit radios, she was shouting. Three of her young interns drifted in behind her, armed with crossbows, and a fourth carried Wolf's old AK-47. These were all of the invading force that had made it to the farmers' inner sanctum; but with the two suits and the super-shotguns, Magee felt confident.

"Very well, m'dear, just a mite slow." Magee shook his head inside the helm, trying to clear the ringing from his ears. "It looks like there are a number of floors. Let's clean up this rat's nest quickly. One of you young'uns make sure of that casualty and collect her weapon; I'll go upstairs'n the rest of you work from here down, hm?"

"It is good, my lord." The Doctor, shotgun at the ready, glanced round. "A welcoming committee of one. Interesting; perhaps they have concentrated their powers in the valley." She strode heavily toward the descending staircase, then stopped by the elevator door. She reached into a tool bag at her waist and retrieved a pair of wire snips.

"Something good?" asked Magee.

"New wiring, run from floor to floor along the handrails. Perhaps internal communications; more likely they have a suicide bomb rigged." She snipped, then replaced the tool. Rummaging round in the bag, she found and displayed a round object about the size of a baseball. "Boys?"

"Yes, ma'am," replied one of the interns.

"Two of you take these flash-bangs and work your way down with me; make sure there are no nasty surprises, hmm?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Gunner and one other stay here, turn up that table for cover and watch the elevator and the exit."

"Yes, ma'am."

She turned back to Magee, who had already set foot on the first step of the ascending staircase. "My lord, should you go adventuring alone? I worry about you."

"Aww, y'nice, m'dear, but I've always been the luckiest man alive, y'know that."

And most of your luck has been me. "Yes, my lord. Have a good time, and we will clear the rest of the facility and join you as way permits."

Magee's bespectacled eyes, through the slit in the faceplate, smiled.

∴

Whatever was causing the great geyser of mud, rocks and steam, which the two men had wondered at, suddenly left the Creek and tore up along the stream's bank at an angle, making off deliberately along the Road with a roar and a rumble. In its absence there fell, locally, a remarkable stillness, though, in the distance, guns occasionally popped.

Armon stood up and scanned the smoking scenario, a salvaged crossbow at the ready. "I think everything's gone east from here, including whatever the eff *that* was."

Wilson, still carrying the broken twenty-two, emerged from the shattered woods. "Agreed; let's inspect this battlefield an' then follow." He walked, gingerly negotiating the slanted, crumbling ditches, toward the cluster of burning vehicles. He'd quickly found that stepping ro near the northern edge of the little trenches invited a broken ankle.

The first tractor, he sadly realized from the color of it remains, had once been Deerie. And the contents of its shattered cage of smashed steel plates had likely once been Jorj, poor man. Next to Deerie's small crater stood its massive cousin, bigger than any example Wilson had ever seen. It had evidently burned – was still smoking. Most of its steel was blackened by soot from, by the smell of it, diesel fuel.

Diesel was not part of the experience of most Creekers, but Wilson had been, years ago, one of a team of small boys assigned to pull apart fuel tanks and oil pans to get at the last uncollected drops. It had not been pleasant work, largely because so many vehicles had, by then, been overgrown with blackberries and invested by bald-faced hornets and paper wasps. He wrinkled his nose. He then noticed that the roof of the Cat's armored cage had been sliced in parallel to the strange ditches. What ... ? A wrecked truck nearby, he realized, had presented to him a similar puzzle. Was this something to do with Selk's pet

project? A new respect for the little scurrier seeped in.

Armon, scanning east and west, worked round to the other side. "Hey, Wilson!"

Wilson winced; the guy could never absorb protocols. "Report; describe."

"Aw, just come see, okay?"

Wilson, checking behind him as he rounded the corner, followed Armon's voice to find him standing on the Cat's tracks by a burnt armored door, hanging open.

A man lay half out of the doorway, covered with second-degree burns and soot. He'd been apparently unable to escape the flames, as there was a shackle round one of his legs, chained to something in the interior.

"Jeeah, Wilson, he's still breathin." Armon turned the unconscious man over.

Aside from the extensive burns, he'd also been shot, from close range. Wilson counted the holes. At least nine times, including once to the head. Limitations of the twenty-two.

"So, what do we do?" asked Armon.

"Got that knife?"

"Well, yeah ... "

"So, put him out of his misery."

"Umm?"

"Ever do sheep?"

"Uhh, yeah."

"Same thing." Wilson pointed to his own throat.. "Here to here. Nothin' to it."

A sound nearby drew their attention. Swiveling round with the cocked rifle in one hand, like a long pistol, Wilson spotted the source. Someone sat under a blasted tree, using its trunk as a backrest. A hand waved in the gathering twilight.

Abandoning protocol himself, Wilson ran to the sitter.

"Emilio! What ... ?"

"Please. With me, sit a little. Talk business, yes?"

Emilio's other hand, Wilson could see, covered a pattern of holes at his waist, and was bloody. He reached for the wound.

"No. It is no good. I tried to make sure of that man and collect his weapon, which was immensely foolish of me. And now he has, I think, relieved me of my pancreas."

"Godammit, Emilio ... "

"Shh. Order of business. First: several good people have died here; Mrs. Perkins is one, Mr. Jorj another. But they all performed well. Second: I have rescued that man's shotgun from the flames. There ... are still two shells. Mr. Armon, I see, has come with you; give him that. It will be ... an improvement over the crossbow. Third, some of

the enemy have passed Hall and assaulted Ridge; but they are very few, I think, and the doors are strong. The bulk of them have gone east for some reason and we are fighting them ... I think ... you should go there. Fourth; is that broken rifle loaded, and do you have spare cartridges?"

"Yes. And yes."

Armon came up, wiping the knife blade with a handful of vegetation. Wilson handed him the shotgun.

"Fifth, then: With me, trade rifles. But do not waste it as I did – aim always for the head." Emilio smiled, but very briefly; Wilson would have willingly witnessed almost anything but that smile.

"Emilio ... we can ..."

"You cannot. You may trust me that I have no remedy and little time; be reassured, the bullet is in case any straggler follows you. I cover, yes? Go; go now, Jeeah with you; dark is coming."

"I'll remember you to Mrs. Molinero."

"You will surely do so, my good friend."

:::

The buckets, those that had not cracked from old age and been tossed aside, reeked. The crew handling them had found rags with which to cover their mouths and noses, but it was certainly an onerous task. Bringing up the buckets was slow work; it was more than a hundred meters from the "tunnel's" entrance at Ridge to its exit at Hall Farm.

Karen stood near the doorway. She and the others could hear much of what was going on: the bursting shells from the big gun, the collapse of the sally port door, the brief battle in the antechamber, footsteps on the stairs. Karen drew her revolver, but no one appeared on the landing at the end of the corridor.

"What is happening?" asked Juanita.

"I don't know. It's like they've skipped over us and gone downstairs."

Marleena strode over with a bucket of sewage. "The sinks and shower stalls are *full*. Where do we put the rest of this?"

Karen didn't hesitate. "Chuck it right out in the hall. Maybe it will slow someone down."

Not twenty buckets later, an echo-laden shout was heard from the bottom of the garderobe. The lower door was open! Little Griff, sounding as if he were kilometers away, gave the all-clear.

Karen, after checking both ways down the corridor, looked into the troubled faces nearest her. "I'm sorry, everyone, we're all going to get *ruinously* messy. Gather your gear, each of you put your stuff in front of you, climb in, and go. Feet first. Half slide, half creep."

The refectory filled with the rustling of bundles, bows, quivers, backpacks, and bodies. Lining up, one after another of Karen's crew shoved one or more items into the hole, undoubtedly causing distress and discomfort to whomever was below, then sat on the edge and slipped in. Marleena, now carrying Arda, who was wrapped in an old quilt head to foot, kicked a small duffel bag to the side of the hole. Juanita lifted the bag for her and tipped it onto someone in the darkness. Ignoring the aggrieved yelp from below, she turned and helped Marleena sit down with the baby and shove off.

Errol brought the last spear from the armory. His wounds not completely healed, he was using it as a crutch. "Mrs. Allyn, I can ..."

"No, they need your experience at the bottom in case they are attacked there. Go!"

Grimly, but willingly, steeling himself against the pain, he went.

An explosion from somewhere shook the room.

Juanita looked at Karen questioningly.

"They're working up from Four, clearing," Karen offered. "You should go."

"You will come too, will you not?"

"I can't, not right away. They have grenades or something; when they find the garderobe they will drop one right on top of us."

Juanita extended her hands. "Then let me take the boy."

Karen looked down at Allyn, sleeping peacefully in his pouch at her left side. "Sure – got a way to wrap him up?"

"But of course. A towel will do, and he will ride between my breasts."

∴

Magee was not pleased to find a steel door, streaked with rust, locked against him. But this was easily remedied. Popping the magazine off his AA-12, he racked the slug out of its chamber and hand-loaded an explosive round from his tool belt. Standing back, he fired point-blank at the doorknob assembly, squinting against the bright flash of the sharp little explosion.

Immediately a shotgun fired as the door swung open -- quite close by and very loud – but instead of feeling a hit on his suit or helm, Magee watched his magazine skip away from him. A smart warrior! This was going to be fun.

There would be another shot coming – but, no, whomever it was held their fire. Magee could not risk a peek; he turned away as he stood up, and reached into his pouch for a spare shell. Buckshot; just what was wanted. This he popped into his chamber and threw his shotgun over his shoulder to fire behind him into the room. Strange

sounds – something rolling? – came to him from the general direction of his assailant.

A woman's voice – an old woman's voice – pierced the air. "Watch out, Avery, sunnabitch is armored! Cap-a-pie!"

Two of them at least! And experienced, clearly. Change of plan. Magee scrambled in the other pouch at his belt for his one flash-bang, hoping it would not prove to be a dud. This would require two hands. He set his shotgun against the wall, and was not surprised to see it immediately shot and knocked to the floor, undoubtedly damaged. He pulled the fuse ring on the bomb, counted to three, and tossed it over his shoulder into the room. A satisfying commotion ensued, followed by a disappointingly dull thump.

Someone had jumped on the bomb and suppressed the blast.

Magee swung round and bounded into the room. *A bit old for this sort of thing, but when ya gotta, ya gotta.* To his consternation he found himself facing two wheelchairs by a table, one empty. In the other sat a large round-shouldered hag, completely focused on re-loading a sawed-off twelve-gauge. In three steps he crossed the room and disarmed her, snapped the gun shut, and was in command of the situation.

On the floor lay a man, already moaning and stirring. Although he had stumps for legs, he looked strong and still dangerous. Even as he'd fallen across the hissing flash-bang, the leader – he had to be the leader – had had the presence of mind to draw a derringer with one hand and a throwing knife with the other. Best neutralize him immediately.

But the old lady apparently didn't know when she was licked; she picked up a heavy old telephone handset and threw it at the shotgun, then some kind of electronic thing in a box, and then, from somewhere, produced, of all things, a short sword, and stood up, all the while uttering colorful curses. *Okay, be that way.* Magee changed his aim and fired into her. The hag sat down heavily, rolled backward a few centimeters and subsided at last, but not without offering Magee a strange and quizzical smile.

What was that smile about?

Instinctively, hackles raised, Magee turned toward the door.

The last person he'd expected to see was standing there, less than two meters away, aiming a large chromed pistol right at the eye-slit in Magee's helm.

Magee lifted the sawed-off, ready to trip the trigger again just as soon as he could get its aim onto any part of his target, but he was painfully aware that for the second time in his life, someone had the drop on him.

The Doctor, whose hearing was especially acute, followed the sounds of small-arms combat near and far. Some of this was easily interpreted; her minions were efficiently clearing rooms for her. Other sounds made less sense, and were beginning to concern her. There was action three or more floors above her, which she judged involved Magee; then closer, as though someone had engaged her rear guard at the entrance – that staccato racket was surely the AK, but what was the other? Neither shotgun nor twenty-two. One more floor to clear, and then see for herself what Magee had got himself into. That would be slow, but one's rear must be secure.

She climbed the stairs behind her young men and followed them onto the landing.

Imagine! A nuclear battery. She'd verified not only its existence, but its status. From the LEDs and gauges, she'd seen that it would last, at the current rate, a good twenty years. Exactly what The Doctor ordered. But this rat's nest must be cleared, the insurrection of the peasants put down, once and for all, before she could plan her future.

One last level. The young men swung into a room, covering each other. Clear. Another. Clear. Another.

Here they encountered difficulties. Someone was shooting at them! One returned fire with his crossbow and lurched back into the corridor, apparently hit. The other tossed a flash-bang into the room, then, after the explosion, cleared the room himself. The Doctor inspected her damaged soldier.

"Where did they get you?"

"Uhh ... shoulder, ma'am. Not too bad."

"You can still fight?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good."

The other returned. She turned to him. "What did you find?"

"Old lady and an old man. Really old. He was already half dead. She was *shooting* at us; then after the bomb we got her."

"You made sure of them?"

"Yes, ma'am, cleared. Here's the weapon. One round left."

The Doctor inspected the tiny green pistol. "Cute. I've heard of these but never seen one. Keep it. Let's get the next room. Load your partner's crossbow for him; he has a bad arm."

The youths worked the next doorway and then the next.

Here they found a mystery; several old people who had, apparently, committed mass suicide. The oldest corpse, a small wizened woman with white hair in a bun, held, of all things, a Glock tightly gripped in both hands. One of the young men pried it loose and checked the

magazine and the chamber – both empty. "Ma'am, could this be Wolf's sidearm?"

"Why yes, I believe it could. He came back to Roseburg without it. Hang onto that, too. I believe I have some Parabellum back at the truck."

Things had quieted down upstairs; presumably Magee had secured his objective and was exploring. She would have to wrap things up here and check on him.

The next room presented a difficulty; raw sewage had been spilled, in quantity, into the hallway, and would have to be negotiated to proceed farther. The stench was indescribable, and the interns showed a disinclination to walk through the stuff to clear the room.

"Now, boys, let's not be fastidious."

"No, ma'am, we're on it."

They stepped into the slick brown stream. Just as they did so, The Doctor's sensitive ears picked up the smallest of sounds behind her – as of someone walking on the balls of bare feet, almost tiptoe. She brought up the AA-12 and swung round to bring it to bear. As she did so, two loud pops, as from a small-bore pistol, resounded in the corridor. From the corner of her eye, The Doctor saw only a heel as whomever it was disappeared into the death-room they had just cleared. She swung back to check on her interns, only to find them both sagging onto the mired floor of the corridor. One was cursing liberally. Both had clearly been shot, on either side of and past her, below their body armor, and neither looked as if he had any fight left in him.

The Doctor was, quite suddenly, effectively alone. Swinging back to the door, she strode over and slipped in as quickly as her armored suit would permit, covering all the corners with the AA-12. Surely whomever had attacked was not one of these dead old ladies. Was there a closet? There was a door! She realized she'd heard it click shut. Neither of those dolts lying out there in the hallway had mentioned a door. Oh, well. If you want something done right ... she saw that there was no lock in the doorknob, nor a keypad on the wall nearby. Trying the knob, she found that it turned. She opened the door a crack, and threw in her one remaining flash-bang.

After the burst, she entered, shotgun at the ready, but found only some kind of tiny bunkroom with empty steel bunks. There was yet another door at the other end. She advanced and cracked that one. This led to a well-lit large room with tables and chairs, with a kitchen at the other end. A large serving window, with a stainless-steel counter, offered good cover there; The Doctor would have to clear that kitchen before exploring farther.

As she was about to do so, however, two more pops came from an open doorway to her right. The corridor! Moving as fast as the suit

would allow, The Doctor reached the doorway, only to find that her men were lying face down in the muck. Both had been double-tapped! And brown footprints led back once again to the doorway behind which the old women had died. She was being led a merry chase.

This will not do. Thoroughly concerned now, The Doctor retraced her steps to the bunkroom, with the shotgun at ready, and approached the doorway to the death chamber. Ah, movement at last within her field of fire! She held down the trigger. The AA-12, on full automatic, roared as it tore apart the person who lurched into the bunkroom.

But something did not seem right. Leaning over for a better view through her eye-slit, The Doctor glimpsed her victim. It was the already-dead old lady, the one who'd held the Glock! Quickly The Doctor began to re-assume her defensive posture; but as she did so, something flashed at the edge of her vision.

∴

Karen had expected the dagger, plunged deep within the slit in her strange opponent's helmet, to end the fight, yet the hands that gripped the big shotgun still moved with deadly purpose. She gripped the barrel, gasping as it burned her one hand, and body slammed the jointed Kevlar suit, then put her right foot behind the other's left leg, planted for a split second, then kicked back against the leg. Surprising strength resisted her, but the two toppled together between the rows of bunks. The shotgun fired again and again, right by her ear, almost stunning her. Why had the long knife, still protruding from the helmet's face, not killed? Never mind, *focus*.

Her enemy abandoned the idea of shooting and tried to hit Karen in the side of the head with the gun barrel. Karen rolled right, and, taking a chance on timing, drew her revolver, put it alongside the hilt of the dagger, and pulled the trigger five times. One shot misfired, but the other four struck home. The heavy armored suit stiffened, and then lay almost still. The arms and legs continued to flex rhythmically, though there seemed to be no longer any purpose in them.

Karen, still lying prone atop her twitching foe, holstered the emptied revolver, retrieved her bloodied knife, wiped it on the corpse's Kevlar for lack of anything better and sheathed it, then yanked the big shotgun away from the strange figure's gloved hands and tossed it across the room.

Before anything else was to be done, she must reload.

Karen, legs wobbly, arose and reeled across the roomful of bodies to an upended chair, which she righted, hand trembling. She drew the revolver, gripped the still-warm barrel between her knees and pulled at the extractor rod, swinging out the cylinder to shove the shells out. The brass empties, along with one dud, tinkled across the blood-

pooled floor. Now shaking all over, she fished nine new rounds, one at a time, from her ammunition pouch and shoved them into the chambers of the tiny cylinder, then snapped it shut with her thumb. She watched the armored suit from the corner of her eye as she did so. The heels of its boots were lightly tapping the floor.



She holstered the revolver, then, agonizingly, rose from the chair and returned to the armored fighter. The gloved hands were still slowly grasping at the air. Why had not a knife thrust and four shots through the eye-slit finished this man?

Karen explored the helmet and found and unsnapped its fastenings. Drawing it off the head awkwardly, she found herself looking into what had once been a woman's face. Or was it?

The features, as best Karen could tell – she had damaged them considerably – were regular and not unattractive. Ellen Murchison might have resembled this, years ago. Long hair, drawn up into a bun like Mrs. Lazar's. A strong jaw line. The eyes –

One eye had been thoroughly – *shattered* was the right word – by the knife, or the twenty-two, or both. There were orbital muscles – that would be the superior rectus – but also fine wires – platinum? Karen recoiled.

As she did so, the other eye's pupil contracted and focused on her.

Karen drew her revolver and fired all nine rounds, double action. None misfired.

The woman – or *thing*, whatever – jerked and lay still.

Karen returned to the chair, her breath rasping, and reloaded again. Very little ammunition remained to her. She looked across at the shotgun. No, too big to be practical for her. Perhaps she could chuck it down the garderobe; perhaps Errol or Marleena could use it.

She listened to her surroundings.

Everything had gone strangely quiet. Though Karen had concentrated on the problem at hand, she now realized there had been fighting in other parts of the facility. Why hadn't the mines been set off? These people – or *this* – must have found and interfered with the detonating system. Briefly she considered checking upstairs, but the people who had gone down the pipe were her current responsibility. Time to go and find them.

Karen stood up, crossed the room, and retrieved the massive shotgun.

On her way out, she discovered again the upper torso of Mrs. Lazar, with whose body, using all of her strength, Karen had decoyed the armored creature.

The old woman's surprised-looking eyes, which had suffered from cataracts, were open and drying. Karen bent over and drew the eyelids closed.

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Wolf squatted on his haunches and rolled the legless man over. Lots of damage to his middle, as might be expected. The air, still blue with the smoke of combat – and execution – stank of the man's burnt tunic.

"You're a mess, fella," said Wolf softly.

"Tell me what I don't know. Want to put me back in my chair?"
Wolf looked over the chair. "Should I check it for surprises?"
"There was a knife right by my hand. Did I reach for it when you came over?"
"No."
"Saw you kill that sunnavabitch ... thought we might have a thing or two in common."
"Maybe." Wolf tested the wheels of the chair with his foot, figured out the brakes and set them, then lifted the man, into his seat. Blood began to soak into the shredded tunic, but the man didn't seem concerned. Shock and bravado served for anesthetic, apparently. Wolf had seen this many times.
The two regarded each other in silence for a moment. Wolf busied himself reloading the Coonan, one ear cocked for activity from down the stairwell.
His host spoke again. "Aren't those revolver rounds?"
"Yeah. It's kind of a unusual gun."
"All guns are getting unusual now."
"And seems like every one of 'em came here today."
"So ... are you one of *them*?"
Wolf glanced at the lifeless suit of armor on the floor. "Was, not too long ago." He looked Mr. Control Room in the eye. "It's kinda over out there, maybe. Th'two sides have fought each other to a standstill for now."
"Got a name?"
"Not one that matters."
"Mine's Avery Murchison."
"Are you the boss man up here?"
"No, kind of a unit commander. Was."
"Who would I talk to about stuff, then?"
Avery cocked his head over. "Got a feeling I don't really know." A fleeting expression crossed his face. "There's a one-armed girl. If *she's* alive, talk to her."
Wolf took in the damaged room, missing little. "What the eff was this all about, anyway?"
Avery, beginning to grow pale, gestured vaguely at the armored corpse. "Was that Magee?"
Wolf raised his eyebrows. "Yeah."
"He ... did you dirty?"
"Yeah, actually. I kinda did him first, but he, ah, upped the ante."
"Well, he was trying to do the whole world dirty. Or would have, if he'd pulled this off."
"I appreciate your confidence, but are you telling me too much?"
Avery shifted in his seat. Pain was beginning to reach him.

"I don't think so, somehow. Hoping to recruit you for something."
Wolf tucked the Coonan in his belt and reached for his carbine to sling it over his shoulder. "What would that be?"

"Help me destroy this facility."

Wolf smiled. "Yeah, it's potentially a liability, from some things I been told. There's a big bomb downstairs, but I've got no fuses and ain't inclined to cross any wires. Whatcha thinkin'?"

"Got another way. Take you a few moments and plenty of time for you to clear out."

Wolf considered. "You want me to deliver you to anybody? Could maybe do that."

"Jeeah, no. I've been rearranged, I can tell. Been hurt before. And what use would I be, out *there*, after all this is gone?"

"Got a point, 'm'afraid." Wolf strode over to the control panel and pointed at the dials. "'S'got anythin' to do with these?"

"Yep. We have to knock out a little pin so's it will hit ground zero, then we're good to go."

...

The remaining trucks had drawn themselves up in a fighting circle. Two were in flames, dissected by the strange weapon that had been digging all the trenches. Its whirlwind of burning debris had gone up to New Ames, set the house on fire, and swept back through the fight, macerating road, trees, fences and friend and foe alike. The Creekers, trying to set up a perimeter and come to grips with the invaders, spread round to the east, north and west of the trucks, but gave the geyser of rocks and burnt soil a wide berth.

Then it moved off.

Everyone watched its path of destruction as it tore across the Creek and jumped up Ridge, crossing the ridgeline and turning west. The mountain began to shed glowing debris, some of which flew over the crest and rolled, hissing, down among the fire-killed trees.

A few shots rang out, and battle was rejoined.

Night fell.

...

"Hold still, Bolo, while I figure this out."

"I am holding still, Mr. Josep, sir."

Josep winced. Of course he was; Bolo had more resistance to pain than anyone from Roundhouse. Or, not that exactly. Maybe it was that Bolo's body felt as much pain as did any other, but somehow the big man didn't *understand* pain. This somehow had affected everyone around him; through the years, Bolo's family (which was everyone who knew him) had gone to great lengths to spare him injury or sickness, as if he had always remained a child.

And now here he was with a crossbow bolt in his temple, and he was sitting up and talking and apparently not the worse for it. Across Bolo's lap from Josep squatted Mrs. Wilson. In the dim firelight, Josep could just make out that she was examining Bolo. Krall, the big dog, wrapped herself round Billee's feet and rested her head on Bolo's thigh, sighing.

Billee frowned. "I'm not really *good* at this. We need Dr. Tom, or Mrs. Chaney, or at least Karen or Juanita."

"Me neither," assented Josep. "Bolo, you've been shot in the side of the head and the bolt twisted as it went in; I don't think we can draw it without some idea which way it turned."

"It's in my ... where I think?" Bolo made a woebegone face.

Josep's voice fell to a whisper. "Yes."

"Why am I alive?"

"We don't know. 'The Lord works in mysterious ways' is as good an answer as I've ever heard."

Vernie Watkin, carrying a long old-fashioned flintlock, crawled over. "Jeeah," he said, looking at Bolo, then addressed himself to Josep and Billee. "They want a *parley*."

A momentary rage crossed Billee's face. "*After all they've done?*"

Josep wasn't sure how to answer this. Billee had proved an outstanding tactical leader; but since Wilson's disappearance she seemed to be bent on annihilation. He settled for answering with a question. "Should we have more of our people go through what Bolo's going through, or worse?"

"I'm not too bad," said Bolo. Josep shushed him.

"I know what you mean," replied Billee to Josep, "but I don't have to like it."

"What have they got?" asked Josep of Vernie. "Spokesman? White flag?"

Vernie looked surprised. "Yes to both. Some did not understand the flag thing at first. He was almost shot."

"All right, let us go and talk to the man."

Billee did not like being left out of this, but she could see Josep's expectation that she would stay with Bolo. And Bolo certainly looked like he could use the company. So she kept to her crouch by his side, her knee lodged in Krall's ribs, patting Bolo's hand.

Josep followed Vernie, stepping over the strange tilted ditches, taking advantage of what cover was available, toward the "front." This consisted of a small circle of armored trucks, two of them in shambles and emitting gouts of smoke, lit from in front by the strange fire on top of Ridge, and from behind by the last gutterings of the burnt-out shell of New Ames, on a slightly higher elevation. Creekers and Roundhousers occupied the nearest hedgerows, sporting twenty-twos, bows, spears, and swords. A faint smell of damp saltpetre, mixed with

that of the wounded soil of the fields, hung in the air.

They came to Tomma, who held the sights of the Hawken steadily on a figure sitting on the running board of one of the trucks. Even in the dim light one could see the man was tall, thin, world-weary, cagey, and authoritative. A cottonwood branch rested across his knees with a rosette of white plastic flagging tied to one end. He appeared to be unarmed.

"Bring me up to speed?" asked Josep.

"Nothing new," replied Tomma. "He asked for our leader, and, I guess, right now, right here, you're it."

"No sign of bad faith?" Josep peered into the dismal light ahead.

"None, they've not fired anything since he started waving that stuff, and there's been no sign of anyone manning slits or any movement toward an attack or breakout, that we can see."

"Good job. I guess there's nothing for it but to see what he wants." Josep laid down his weapons and stood halfway up. "Greetings."

If the stranger was startled, he gave no sign. The stick stirred slightly on his knees, and he shifted his weight. "Hey. Yew'd be th' man in charge?"

"Maybe. Some people, if they were to show up, I might defer to. Till then, you have me."

"Y'be fair; I like that." He pronounced "like" as if it were "lack." Where was he from? "Y'see, I'm thinkin'." He pointed a bony finger at the rumbling mountain, behind Josep. "The shifts't brought us here, they *got* to be dead, or that godawful *thing*'d be sweepin' y'all up by now. If they's dead, that's all to th' *good*, 'cuz it were more their war than enny of us over here. Boys is *tired* 'a dyin' 'an I speck y'all feelin' 'bout th' same. Say?"

"I won't pretend it hasn't been rough. We have some people that have lost husbands and wives. Children, even."

"Yeah, figgered. I *hate* that; purely I do. 'Cuz if one of 'em was to knife me in th' back on my way outta here, I'd say I had it *comin'*."

A faint rustling caused Josep to check behind him. Bolo, apparently completely ambulatory, was standing in the Road, supported on one side by Billee and on the other by none other than Wilson! And was that Armon with them? Josep gaped, but Wilson rolled his forefinger in the air, which Josep took to be a sign to keep the parley going. He returned his attention to the stranger. "What do you propose?"

"T'let us walk. We'll leave all our weapons an'y'c'n have these bloody machines, too."

"Surety?"

"Aw, fella, if ya kep' *me*, what'd stop these kids come back an' fight ya if they had a mind? *I* ain't nothin' t'them. None of us has much t' watch out for but our own skins. And, y'know – " he chuckled – "I 'speck yer in like case; y'farms look like fried *shit* t'me."

"You may have a point. Where do you think to go?"

"Back down th' road we made; try t'build a proper tribe down to th' Umpqua."

Wilson stepped up. "Hi, my name's Wilson."

"Oh," said the stranger, "seen *you* afore. Ain't you th' honcho, then?"

"Yes and no. We're a mixed lot. I happen to know it's a long walk from here to the Umpqua, how do you propose to eat, unarmed?"

"Well, thanky fer yer concern; we thought we'd take our *wounded* along, y'know."

Josep winced; he could feel the sly smile in that voice even from this distance.

"If I understand you right, I recommend against what you have thought of," continued Wilson. "You have preserved food in the trucks?"

"Waal, yeh, MREs. Some. Packaged stuff. It's not *too* bad. Got some smoked venison. No, venison, *really*."

Wilson turned to Josep. "What say we have each of them, in the morning, take something of that, and a water container. We'll put a cache of hunting weapons – four bows a couple of knives, and say eight arrows – by the Bridge for them to pick up on their way out. That work for you?"

Josep nodded. "That works for me." He turned toward the seated stranger. "You catch all that?"

"Oh, hail, *yeah*. I hear *anything* related to my *skin*."

"We'll be watching."

"Wouldn't expect no less. So, if nobody's trigger finger is any itchier than *usual* – " the thin man nodded toward Tomma – "None of my boys here will so much as blink, and I'll gather up our toys, real slow like, and y'all c'n watch me pile 'em up right here in th' open? An' I surely would hate to die of *mistakin'* y'all on this deal."

Josep looked at Wilson, who nodded. "We're good here," replied the Roundhouse leader. "Our word as Christians, Jeeans, and human beings, which, may it still be true, we are. We will not break 'this deal,' though you must understand we cannot stand down while you proceed."

"That was kinda *complicated*, but I gotcha; gonna get up real slow now and commence t'gatherin'."

Wilson waved Emilio's little twenty-two vaguely toward the man, with the barrel pointed to the darkened sky. "Please do."

An explosion shook the ground beneath their feet. All eyes turned to the mountain, from which a ball of fire emerged. The flame lit the valley and the hills all around as it rose, then vanished into the lowering clouds.

∴

The band of refugees were washing themselves desperately in the cold waters of the Creek, by the light of the last flames of Hall, when the explosion startled them.

"What was that?" asked one of the Roundhouse children. It was the one with the puppy, standing knee deep.

Karen held her hand protectively over little Allyn's hiding place in the sack at her side. *Too damp out here for a baby.* She turned back to look at the girl, who, like herself, was still half-covered with Ridge's offal.

"No idea. Ridge is ... gone, I should think."

"Okay," the girl said, holding the squirming puppy at arm's length. "Never liked that place anyway. How come it's so quiet out here?"

"I don't know that either. Your brother will be back soon, and maybe we'll have some better information. Keep washing that poor dog, and do your hair too. And do it twice. At this rate we'll never smell human again."

∴

Karen unhooked the baby from her nipple and tossed him gently onto her right shoulder, holding him in place with the palm of her hand and squeezing. A tiny burp issued forth. Mothering was for two-handed women, she'd long ago decided; she got more exercise moving Allyn from bag to breast to shoulder and back to the bag, after finding moss to line it with, than almost anything else she did these days. *Except fighting that monster.*

Marleena, with a gurgling Arda in her arms, sat down beside Karen. "How is he doing?"

"Hungry as ever, but never a peep out of him."

In the late-night quarter-moonlight, with thickening clouds, Marleena's expression could not be fully read, but Karen could see that there was a question and a worry in the set of her shoulders.

"That's never really changed; he seems happy and he has grown some but there's something not right. He could be deaf and mute, for all I know."

"Does he blink at loud noises? There were a lot of them yesterday."

"Oh! Yes, so maybe that's not it."

"It's not like you to go fuzzy on a problem."

"Where he's concerned, I do. I must be shielding myself in some way."

"Well give the two of you time. He was born so early; there must be a lot of catching up for him to do."

"How is Juanita?"

They both looked away toward the trees. Movement, in the

moonshadow of one, had gone on for some time.

Marleena's silhouetted face swiveled back to Karen. "She's been digging since we found him. She won't accept help."

"He asked her to do it herself. I think his idea was that it would help her, having a hard task to do, so as not to go crazy with the grief."

"It's not your way, here on the Creek, burial – is it?"

"No, but in such times – so many bodies. And I don't think we'll be needing the composting any more."

Guchi appeared from behind them carrying the heavy shotgun, with Errol, who was hobbling with a spear for an improvised crutch. "May we report?" asked Guchi.

"Sit, guys," replied Karen, "But keep it low." She gestured with her head toward Juanita.

"Oh – yeah." Errol sat heavily on a log. Guchi set down the weapon and slowly settled himself down beside his friend, looking ill at ease.

For a few moments no one spoke. Karen broke the spell by touching Guchi's knee with hers.

"Oh," said Guchi again. "Well, I went up and had a look. Enough fire came out of Ridge that the trucks and the "tank" thing are just trashed. Nobody around. Up top, it was all flying rocks and smoke or steam, or both, and I couldn't get any closer, and then all of a sudden it stopped."

"Stopped?"

"Whatever was causing all the rocks burning, it was just over. I tried to get a look in the hole, but ... I started feeling not so good. So I came down."

"What's 'not so good?'"

"Uhh ... nausea? Ringing in my ears? Mouth tastes like metal. Um. Fingertips feel funny."

"Can you stand up suddenly?"

"Funny you should ask, I hid behind some stuff on the way down, checking out the terrain for unfriendlies, and when I got up I fainted."

"I'm sorry; I realize now I shouldn't have let you go."

"Well, I'm glad I did. I think I can say with confidence we're not leaving anybody behind that we could have helped."

"I think you're right, Guchi. Won't you go lie down and rest a bit? There's some water and a few blankets we've got here."

"I'll do that." Yamaguchi pointed to the supergun. "Too heavy – give it away." He stood up again, and wobbled. He caught himself by grasping Errol's spear, then shook his head and walked in the direction of the abandoned trucks.

Errol watched him go, then turned his attention to Karen. "What's up?"

"I think the containment of the thorium battery's been breached."

The fuel's been aerosolized and the top of Ridge is dangerously radioactive now."

Marleena held Arda closer. "What about here?"

"There hasn't been much wind, but I think most of the plume – so far – will have gone down toward the Calapooia. That will change by mid-morning. And it's going to rain, which can't be good."

"Can we get away?"

"We'll have to. The Creek is finished." Karen looked at Errol. "How are you holding up?"

"No new bleeding, thanks. We've been inventorying the trucks and the bulldozer. They're all damaged enough not to be useful for transport, not if we have to leave soon. I have the young people making Molotovs with some of the fuel, in case we meet the former owners."

"I don't know, it's awfully quiet up the Road."

"I was thinking the same. Meanwhile, there will be enough of that vacuum-packed food for everyone to have a stout breakfast."

Young Griff came running from the trucks. "Someone's coming, and there's no password. What do we do?"

"Say hello. If it's someone you know, call them over to your perimeter and do a visual by torchlight, but not out in the open. If it isn't, tell them to stay put, and keep listening for activity. If they don't stay put, shoot them and then keep listening for activity."

"Gotcha!" He ran off, clearly delighted to be a warrior with a commission.

Karen returned her attention to Errol. "Were there any weapons at the trucks? Any more people around?"

"There was a substantial fight here. We've found four of our dead, besides Mr. Molinero alive – at first – and two of theirs. In the woods there was one of them, he'd been trying to get away and broke his leg in one of these weird ditches – someone caught up with him and finished the job, I think. No, they took all their stuff except a Bowie knife someone dropped and a few crossbow bolts."

Griff returned, bringing Raoul and Ceel, who were laden with bows, quivers, and belt knives. They dumped their loads, winded, and smiled at Karen and Errol in the growing light.

"Is that my axe on your belt?" Errol asked Raoul.

"Yes; want it back?"

"No, looks good on you. What brings you here?"

"We're heading to Bridge to make a cache." Raoul reached for an unattended water bottle.

"Whatever for?" asked Karen.

"It's over. The bandits have surrendered. They're pretty sure the folks that brought them here are all dead, and they want to go home, which they say is as bad as here, but at least it's not here. Josep and

Wilson gave them safe-conduct –"

"Wilson is *alive*?" Karen's heart leaped for Billee's sake, as well as for what remained of the Creek.

"Josep is *alive*?" shouted Marleena at the same time, standing up and almost spilling a wide-eyed Arda.

"Yes – Armon, too – to go to Bridge and pick up this stuff for hunting purposes. Everything else, they've turned in and they are being escorted this way."

Errol made an impatient gesture. "Right through us?"

"We didn't know you were here. How did you get out, anyway?"

"Never mind," said Karen. "We'll have to get off the Road right away and form a new perimeter, just in case. But you two, I think, should hand over your jobs to Griff – and one of his friends – and stay with us."

"Why?"

"Raoul, your mom is going to need you in a little bit."

The smile faded. "What? No, wait, I think I know. Wilson acted kinda funny." Raoul, who had arrived full of vitality, seemed to shrink visibly.

Ceel looked at Karen, then at Raoul, then at Karen again. "Me, too?" she asked, in a small voice.

Karen felt upon herself the great weight of the terrible messenger. "Errol, everybody away from the trucks, perimeter in the woods. We'll join you. Griff, this stuff to Bridge, hop! Raoul, I'm deeply sorry, your mom's over there near the Creek, see that tree? Go to her.

"Ceel ... come with me, please."

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Jahn ambled along his short column, ostensibly checking the stretcher cases, but really looking for signs of rebellion. One wrong move on this march, he knew, and they would all die quickly. In the lead at some distance, well out of reach on either hand, as well as bringing up the distant rear, angry and dangerous men and women watched and walked, rifles, shotguns and bows at the ready. Nerves were stretched taut in both parties. Fire in the mountain had reached some kind of ammunition, and the cooking-off brought a similitude of killing to all ears.

"Sir?" a sullen youth whispered as he passed.

"Don't y'even think it."

"We could rush 'em, you'd give us a sign."

"You in insub-ordy-nation right now, boy; want 'em ta see me kill ya bare-handed?"

"Nossir."

"Good, I'll overlook this f'now an' we'll discuss th' quality of yer

trainin' if we ever get t'Roseburg. Look me up an' ask f'help wi'y' prproblem, then, hey?"

"Yessir."

Jahn finished his tour of the column and worked his way back to the head of the line. He could see, in the near distance, the old D-8 sitting in the middle of a blackened patch of earth. Behind it, a stricken MRAP still emitted smoke.

"Spread out a little bit, please," ordered the man he'd overheard called Joseph, or some such. "Pass the machines on the left, hands on top of your heads, all eyes front."

Jahn could see, as they neared, that all bodies had been cleared away somewhere, and the vehicles thoroughly canvassed. Foil wrappers had been gathered up and rolled into a ball that someone had not yet carried off. As he suspected, there were more fighters than just the ones that had followed his little army up the valley.

A half-strangled cry, off to the left, drew everyone's attention. Jahn looked left, though careful not to turn his head by much. A small, black-haired woman, brandishing an axe, was running toward them as fast as her short legs could carry her. A revenge play, then; Jahn was familiar with such. So this was how it would all end; he'd have to try to disarm her to protect those under his command and care, then the Joseph guy or the Wilson fellow would have to kill *him*. In a few weeks the lady'd be over it; but he, Jahn, after his long travels in hope of a home, would be no more. He braced himself.

Wilson, however, stepped between the woman and the hesitating column and raised his rifle, aiming it at her. Jahn was filled with admiration. Also, a young man, whom he'd seen in the fighting, was now close on the woman's heels and tackling her. They went down in a heap, and Wilson lowered his weapon and went to them.

Jahn, sure that the immediate crisis was in hand, had better prevent another. "Eyes t'th'front!" he shouted at the wobbling line. "For'rard harch!" The lads pulled themselves together and walked on, hands still on their heads.

As they cleared the vehicles, stepping over the detritus of war and the deep cracks all over the road, a new sight presented itself to Jahn's peripheral vision. A one-armed woman and a black child stood side by side, weapons in hand. There were others in the shadowy wood.

Ahead, not far from the bridge that had led them here, a flock of geese swung by, yelping.

Yeah, Jahn thought. Ol' Mr. Magee, y'bit off way more'n y'c'd chew. If we-all don't starve this winter, I'm gonna run things hella diffrent down t'th' Umpqua!

Quiet reigned along Starvation Creek.

All day, smoke rose, as it had not in a long time, from the chimney at Tomlinson's. Billee brought Mr. Perkins a cup of hash tea, but he ignored it, staring at the wall. His son and daughter leaned on him from either side. No one asked them to come to the living room, and the same grace was extended to Juanita, her sons, and her new daughter-in-law, who'd stayed on the stoop together.

Billee, with Krall dogging her heels, carried the steaming stock pot into the living room – one of the biggest rooms left on the Creek. Outside, a cold rain fell, rattling in the downspouts and off the porch roof. Chairs had been brought from throughout the building, along with assorted buckets turned over for seats. Ladling out cups of the mildly soporific tea, she picked up the thread of the conversation.

"...the kale did better than expected; but we need it all now and there's no more seed. Too late to plant anyway," Tomma was saying.

Karen, sitting in the deep chair that had belonged to old Mrs. Tomlinson, played with Allyn's fingers as he lay in her lap. She looked up. "Won't matter. None of us can stay."

All eyes turned to her.

"Errol and Deela are techies and can confirm that Dr. Mary explained about this – and, and I used to read about it. Ridge, as we all know, was powered by a kind of small nuke. Most of what's been splashed is thorium-232. It emits alpha particles and turns into radium, and eventually stabilizes lead. Also there is some gamma."

Vernie twirled the long Kentucky rifle by the edge of its brass buttplate on the floor before him. "So, what's that mean?"

"You see how it is with Guchi; since he looked in the hole he's been throwing up, off and on, all day. He'll get better, but we won't know for how long. Already most of us don't live as long as in the old days. Dust, some of it too small to even see, is going to be coming down on our houses, the land, the Creek, and for many miles around, maybe for years. It will percolate into the soil, and get into the crops, the animals, the roots of trees: it will taint the very firewood. As we breathe, drink, and eat, it will become part of our teeth, our bones, and our flesh, and it will make the tiniest bits of our flesh grow awry."

"You say it turns into lead." Wilson, sitting on a tall, upended bucket, put his feet out before him and put his hands behind his head. The Doctor's AA-12 lay at his feet. "How long does that take?"

"Half the thorium will turn into lead in fourteen billion years."

Everyone sat still, shocked.

Deela, sitting in the hall doorway with half an eye on Bolo, Guchi, and other wounded lying beyond, spoke up quietly. "The sun itself will go out before that."

Josep, on the couch, tightened his arm around Marleena's shoulder. "How long have we before we must go?"

"There's a lot of this kind of thing in the air and water and soil – and us – already, from the Great Undoing." Karen tipped Allyn up into a half-sitting position, cupping his back with her hand. "It's part of why we don't live so long as the Elders did. We all know it's been hard to bring babies to term, and raise children to adulthood. And cancer hunts us all, all the time. It will take many generations to adapt, even if this hadn't happened here. And then there's other stuff – it's too hot to our south, and I think that's coming our way. More summers like the one we just had, and worse storms. But now that Ridge has been cut open to its heart, yesterday would not be too soon for us to all leave."

"If anyone is pregnant, especially, then?" said Raoul from the front door. He looked into Nine-Ah's face as she came and stood beside him.

"And children, of which there are so few; but this is bad for all of us. Yes, the pregnancies most of all."

Billee missed the cup she was pouring by several inches as she stared; Krall jumped back. "Well, then, what are we waiting for?" Her voice cracked.

Wilson, across the room from her, raised his eyebrows. "Uhh ... Bee?"

"Of course, silly!" She put down the ladle and reflexively covered her belly with her hands. "If this place is extra dangerous to *babies*, we gotta roll!"

Several voices were raised at once. "Where?" asked Tomma over the din. "Where's going to be safer?"

"We can head for Roundhouse for now," replied Josep. "Far enough? And there's no food there, any more than here."

"We will need to go hundreds of kilometers at least," said Karen. "And we'll need to separate into smaller groups, so that we can more easily feed everyone on such game and forage as can be expected."

"Yes," agreed Wilson, straightening up and rubbing his chin. "If any one group fails, there are still the others. But if we are all together, failure will be final for everyone."

"Let's all go together to Roundhouse in the morning, then," offered Josep. "It will take about two days, maybe three with our wounded. You can be our guests there; hopefully no one else has found it yet."

Scooping the half-sleeping Allyn to her shoulder, Karen stood up. "Be thinking of what to put in ponchos and blanket rolls. Some will be able to drag a travois – if anyone doesn't know what that is, we'll show you. We will bundle the kale and carry it on those till it runs out. . Winter is coming and with no certainty of food, it will be hard. Take what you will use, not what you'd like to have. Young Griff here

knows what we brought from Ridge and can advise – right?"

The boy grinned. "Right."

Karen looked round the room. "We can never return. But if we're careful how we travel, hopefully we can rendezvous. Perhaps – there will be a Creek again."

KAREN SHOOK herself awake – literally. One cannot carry enough blankets in a wet winter to make up for near-starvation. The fat from the pig had been a help – though she had decided not to tell the others that wild pigs accumulate more radionuclides than other animals. *We all have worries enough as it is.*

The clouds had broken for now, though. She could see that, beyond the edge of the tarp and the cedar branches. Leaving Allyn nesting in his cradleboard – a design that Errol had come up with that had but one shoulder strap – Karen slung her revolver and knife at her hip and crawled out to pee. At least now there were no mosquitoes.

Griff, wrapped in an animal hide she hadn't seen before, stood up across the clearing and waggled the all-clear with his bow. His frosted breath hung in the air.

Her morning business finished, Karen sought him out beneath his own cedar tree.

She fondled the light gray fur. "What's that you're wearing?"

"I dunno – dogskin? I found it lying on a log. It's really warm."

"It's *wolfskin*. Where was it?" Alarm prickled at her neck and shoulder.

"Next clearing over – the way we're going."

"Show me. And draw your bow." Karen unholstered the Sentinel.

Griff, wondering what he could have done wrong, led the way.

The light in the next clearing was bright enough to hurt Karen's eyes. Snow had fallen in the night on the mountains to their east, and these glowed with unaccustomed sunrise. Griff, arrow at the ready, surveyed the clearing as they both listened for any non-forest sounds, then gingerly stepped forward and stood upright, scanning ahead. He quickly withdrew and settled beside Karen, who had thumbed her hammer.

"There's *meat* on the log now – right where I found the coat."

"Shhh."

For several minutes more, they listened. Nothing but a winter wren disturbed the morning.

Karen whispered. "What ... what kind of meat?"

"Deer. – hind leg!"

An offering of some kind? "Go back absolutely quietly and get everyone up and armed. Defensive perimeter. Hop!" Her own whisper sounded like thunder in Karen's ears. Or was it her heart beating?

Griff slipped quietly away. Water dripped from bracken down the

back of Karen's neck. She should, of course, have gone with the boy. But the thought of venison! She hadn't tasted venison in too many days.

Could Wilson have done this? They were the next valley over, so far as she knew. Couldn't be Josep's group, traveling along the Great River on the other side of Wilson. No, any Creeker would have whistled. This was a stranger – or perhaps an army, such as from Port Land, of whom the Roundhousers had warned. So many ways this could be a trap or a provocation.

"Hey."

The voice – a man's – came from the mountain alder copse across the clearing! Whoever it was had not moved since she and Griff had come – had perhaps watched them – might have her in his sights. Damn it! She was at a disadvantage in all the ways she could think of.

"S'okay," said the voice, in a conversational tone. "I know ya got yer hammer back, I hear pretty good. How's 'bout ya get behind better cover, if it suits ya, and when ya're ready, I'll stand up empty-handed?"

"Let me see hands first, then just stand up already." She eased her indexed finger inside the trigger guard.

A tall man, bald, bearded, and tattooed, wearing a horsehide cloak, arose perhaps twenty meters away, among the leafless alders. He looked familiar – where could Karen have seen this man before? He was none of that sorry lot that had trooped south from Starvation Creek half a moon ago.

"Five steps forward, then stop," Karen barked. If there were weapons at his feet, this would move him precious seconds away from them.

The man complied, evidently quite relaxed. Karen held her front sight squarely in the groove of her rear sight, centered on the man's chest. Her finger rested lightly on the trigger. She drew a long, deep breath and exhaled, to slow the effect of her hammering heart on the sights. "Alone?"

"Well, yeah, but don't take *my* word for it."

"Wouldn't. What do you want here?" With an effort, she scanned all around for sounds and movement. *Peripheral vision*, her father had said, *is almost everything. See without looking.*

Someone was moving through brush, but she could tell who it was. Armon came heavily up to the right of her, bow at the ready. Errol, more quietly, appeared to her left.

The man smiled and nodded." A little parley. Got some thoughts about yer line of travel."

"Are you armed?" Karen asked.

"Now you ask me. Well, back a ways where I can't get to 'em quick an' you can't find 'em, there's a pistol, a carbine, a bow, a quiver with

nine arrows, and a knife. I do hope you'll regard the haunch as a gift, but will not seek to relieve me of my toys."

"What's your parley?"

"Well, yer three lil' tribes now, all goin' north. A while back I had a good talk with a dyin' kid from Port Land. He indicated things was hell *here*, hell *there*, and extra-special-hell *north* of there. If yer goin' Pilgrim, I c'n tell ya, can't get to Canuck Land from here."

"What's 'extra hell' about north of Port Land?" asked Karen.

"There was stuff back in th' day, place called Hanford."

"Heard of it."

"Cooked off. Bad. Ruint ever'thin from th' sea half way to Chicago. And if you think Hanford was bad –"

"Can this guy be on th' level?" whispered Armon.

Still not taking her eyes off her sights, Karen replied, "Yes. I remember the maps."

"– Chicago actually *glows*. Kinda like the top of Starvation Ridge."

"What do you know about Ridge?"

"Well, I'll tell ya. I'm th' one lit it off, with yer boy Mr. Avery Murchison, may he rest in 'ternal peace."

"You were *there*?"

"Yes'm, had business with Old Magee, may he rest in 'ternal hell."

"How did he die?"

"Magee? Three-fifty-seven to the face, actually, ma'am."

"That's good to know."

"Yes, ma'am, that it is."

"And ... how did Avery die?"

"Ma'am, Magee messed him up and he chose to go down with th' ship, as it were."

"Damn it!" Karen had known this in her stomach, but to hear it was another thing, she realized. During their stay at Roundhouse, she'd told of the demise of the last Elders; everyone had been struck with this same despair.

"Sorry, ma'am."

"Wait! I know you!"

The stranger seemed hesitant. "Where would we have met? You aren't th' ... I mean, don't look familiar to me."

"You're the man who ran away – after your army was defeated." She twitched her left side toward him for emphasis. "I believe you did *this*."

"Oh, were you in that fight? You're *good*. Well, yeah, they was all walkin' dead by then. I saw a way to live, so I had a go. But, uhh, yeah, it bothers me. Kinda why I'm here, maybe."

"I don't see the connection."

"Well, that's kinda *my* business. As I useta say, 'only th' livin' deserve ta live.' So, anyways, man said, put th' ray gun on home plate

an' go; I offered t'bring him out, but he was set on stayin'. Said if I had anythin' ta say, say it to a one-armed girl."

To me? "You ... why would Avery even talk to you? Did he know who you are?"

The big man's rough features softened even more. "Well, enough to guess, but he c'd see I meant to, ah, change my ways some."

"We'll ... we'll take that into consideration. So, you've ..."

The man's body relaxed.

"Stand up straight! I might just shoot you yet."

"Why, yes, *ma'am*."

"Well ... so, you've, you've warned us off going Pilgrim; do you ... do you have a recommendation?"

"Me, I'd go East. Cross over, head south. Ask around for th' Prinevilles. I think yer man there, th' big one, has got folks there."

"They'd be *alive*, then?" asked Armon, incredulous.

"Yeah, th' Prinevilles'r not big on eatin' captives any more, they're gettin' better at runnin' cows. Th' chief man, Mr. Lacey, he's a man of his word, so they are in *service*, an' good service as such things go." The man spread his hands. "Arms gettin' tired; answer y'other question holdin' onto a coupla trees?"

Karen's arm was getting tired, too. The sights were wobbling again. "What other question? Umm, yes, you may."

The long hands grasped two small alders. "Thanks. 'What's in it fer you?' Nothin's in fer me fer th' time bein'. Y'all've had it rough, I've had it rough. Thought maybe I'd head East too."

"Not with *us*."

"Didn't ask, did I? So, I'd like go away from here fer now. I'll move real slow. Rest of that doe is hangin' by th' creek down behind me."

"We'll leave and count to one hundred. Then we'll come back and clear the area. Take that leg. We'll leave the wolfskin here, too, when we pack up."

"No, seriously, you *need* th' meat; skin too. Gonna snow. Hard. Oh! Uh, inside th' mountain, didya meet a suit?"

"What?"

"Sort of suit of old Army 'future warrior' armor, lotta Kevlar, carbon whatsit, big old shotgun."

"The ... woman? Yes."

"She get away?"

"She's dead."

"That *so* makes my day. I thank you from th' bottom of my heart."

Karen did not know what to make of this. "We ... we're going now."

"K. I'll be gone when ya get back. Try th' meat on yer puppy, then you'll know it's okay." A disconcerting smile spread over his features.

Karen retreated, lowering the twenty-two's hammer with her thumb.

Her arm ached. Armon and Errol covered her, backing into the frost-burned bracken slowly.

Griff met Karen at the edge of camp, bow drawn, watching the woods. "So, I'm sorry about the skin and all. Wasn't thinking."

Karen holstered the revolver.. What *was* that sound?

One of Griff's sisters sat under the tarp, holding little Allyn. Was he *crying*? A good sign was just what Karen needed just now. If only Billee, Juanita, and Marleena could share in this! But they were with Wilson and Josep's groups, of course. Soon enough, if he proved to be up to it, she'd have to train the child to be silent on command, perhaps. And to be many other things: stealthy, resilient, resourceful, aware. She started in the direction of the cry.

"So, can I keep it?" Griff spoke behind her.

She turned. "Yes. Yes, I think that will be fine. Errol and Armon will bring in the meat. In future, you find anything like that – and ... and I think you will – just report it right away, all right?"

"Right!"

The sky began to darken. They looked up.

One snowflake, then another, and then another, drifted down from the featureless clouds and settled, infinitesimal diamonds, on the long green hands of the cedar.